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STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE: REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL GROUPS, IDENTITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

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FREE CONTRIBUTIONS

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HEARING PERSPECTIVES ON DEAFNESS: A CENTURY-LONG FORM OF POWER[1]

abstract

The first philosophical reflection on deafness dates back to Aristotle, who described the functional link between hearing and voice, clarifying that deafness affects the development of spoken language, not the faculty of language itself. Plato, in Cratylus*, stated that language could also manifest in visual-gestural forms. Thus, foundational texts of the philosophy of language hold a neutral view of deafness and visual-gestural languages. However, at some point in cultural history, the idea emerged that deafness hinders the development of intelligence, causing reflections on visual-gestural languages to be forgotten. It was not until the Enlightenment's re-evaluation of the mind-body relationship that this view of deafness was challenged, thanks primarily to Charles-Michel L'Épée, who founded a school where deaf individuals were treated equally to hearing individuals and learned through their natural sign language. Before and even after him (Milan Congress, 1880), there were many structural injustices, many of which persist today.*

keywords

bilingualism, deaf studies, deafhood, medical history, sign language

1 The idea presented in this contribution belongs to both of the authors. Donata Chiricò developed the theory and main structure and Maria T. De Monte verified the sources and English translations. Donata Chiricò is the referring author for the abstract and for paragraphs 1 and 2, Maria T. De Monte is the referring author of the introduction and for paragraphs 3 and 4. Both authors discussed the results and contributed to the revision of the final manuscript.

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1. Introduction

In the context of the historical-philosophical reflection on speech disorders, the history of deafness plays a significant role. As Sacks defined it, it is a "strange history" (1989/2000, p. 41) comprising a base of stereotyped opinions and prejudices along with sudden and often calculated pedagogical attention (Chiricò, 2014, pp. 43-57). At the same time, it is the story of the rescue of a minority of long-vilified and marginalized individuals who, around the middle of the Eighteenth century, emerged on the world scene, educated themselves, wrote books, taught, traveled, founded schools, affirming themselves as people among people. This is the base upon which, nowadays, deaf people fight to have their condition understood well beyond a diagnosis, starting from the inner and outer 'struggle' that they daily engage with "to explain to themselves and others their existence in the world" (Ladd, 2003, p. 3). Being deaf is undoubtedly a circumstance that cannot be chosen.

Yet, for many of these people, deafness means carrying through – sometimes involuntarily – the more or less obligated tradition of physical, moral, and intellectual survival, through specific daily practices. At the beginning of their journey to social and self-awareness, multiple definitions were coined to recognize being *Deaf*; that is, being a person of average intelligence who needs to continually assert herself as non-hearing non-mute in a world of hearing speakers, from *deafness* as a medical condition. This was the necessary journey to take to ensure that their *deafhood* (Ladd, 2003) would not only be *deafness*, but include their lives as defined by their actions and their choices, rather than the degree of their residual hearing. Since the biology of Aristotle, through the early 'healings' of the times of Bonet and his late contemporaries, the history of deafness is a history of tentative approaches to overcome deafness while uncovering what it hides within; sign language, deaf identity, and a subtle sense of pride which is now called "deaf gain" (Bauman *et al.* 2009). In this journey in the scientific definition of deafness, we will uncover the words of those who, consciously or not, made the building blocks of bridges, built to resist the isolation of the hearing (and deaf) world (De Monte, 2019).

2. Philosophical sources and early "healings"

In classical Athenian culture, no prejudicial opinions are attested against deafness. Indeed, Plato's *Cratylus* – a foundational work for the Western sciences of language – leads us to consider that the emergence of languages has to do with the specific morphology and physiology of our biological apparatuses, for which differently organized bodies give rise to differently articulated languages.

> SOCRATES: And here I will ask you a question: Suppose that we had no voice or tongue, and wanted to communicate with one another, should we not, like the deaf and mute, make signs with the hands and head and the rest of the body?
> HERMOGENES: There would be no choice, Socrates.
> SOCRATES: We should imitate the nature of the thing; the elevation of our hands to heaven would mean lightness and upwardness; heaviness and downwardness would be expressed by letting them drop to the ground; the running of a horse, or any other animal, would be expressed by the most nearly similar gestures of our own frame.
> HERMOGENES: I do not see that we could do anything else.
> SOCRATES: We could not; for by bodily imitation only can the body ever express anything.
> HERMOGENES: Very true (Plato, *Cratylus*, 422e-423).

Aristotle, for his part, addresses the question of the cognitive condition of the deaf from the point of view of a general and comparative reflection on the relationship between sound *(ψόφος)*, voice *(φωνή)*, and language *(διάλεκτος)*. He was aware that human cognition found its maximum performative expression in the production of linguistic sounds and that hearing was the sense par excellence of intelligence, specifically "ethical" and "political" (*Problemata*, XIX, 27, 919b, 26-37; 920a 3-7; *Politics*, VIII, 5, 1340a 5-1340b 20). By systematizing some intuitions of Greek tradition, from Homer to Herodotus to Hippocrates, he points out that, while any object can produce sounds, the voice is the connotation of "animate" beings with larynxes (e.g. animals, children, and deaf people). It is, therefore, a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for verbal language, the latter being a "voice articulated" through the devices of phonation, and thanks to hearing.

> Voice and sound are different from one another, and language differs from voice and sound. The fact is that no animal can give utterance to voice except by the action of the pharynx, and consequently, such animals as are devoid of lungs have no voice, and language is the articulation of vocal sounds by the instrumentality of the tongue. [....]. This power, or language, is peculiar to man. While the capability of talking implies the capability of uttering vocal sounds, the converse does not hold good. Men who are born deaf are in all cases also dumb; that is, they can make vocal sounds, but they cannot speak (Aristotle, *Historia Animalium*, IV, 9, 535a; 535b; 536b).

Aristotle merely highlights the functional link between hearing and voice, and the consequent state of objective difficulty experienced by those who cannot develop verbal language naturally. His perspective is that of a scholar who analyzes a phenomenon – the ability to voice something – from an ethological point of view and, precisely for this reason, he never confuses the plan of behaviors description with that of value judgments. Aristotle's highly refined system of sciences spares no space for a prejudicial view of deafness, which is seen precisely for what it is, namely, the mere biological reason behind the failure to develop spoken language naturally. The philosophical biology of Aristotle gave a scientific explanation of mutism and, above all, clarified that deafness leaves speech organs intact, creating the background for the first pedagogical methodologies to educate deaf people.

The oldest retrievable work concerning their education addresses the problem of "word learning" by deaf people. It was published in Madrid (1620) by Juan Pablo Bonet with the title: *Reducción de las letras y arte para enseñar a hablar los mudos*. The publication was based on the contribution of the Benedictine monks in deaf education since the 16th century, starting from Pedro Ponce de Léon, universally recognized as the first educator and rehabilitator of the

deaf and founder of the "oralist or Spanish school" (López Torrijo, 2005, p. 10). He is credited with having interrupted the centuries-old tradition of considering the mutism of deaf people as a lifetime condemnation, for which they were excluded from the sacraments as well as from the right to inherit – among other such banishments (López Torrijo, 2005, pp. 15 and ff.). For his part, Bonet earned a significant reputation thanks to the fact that he took care of the education of Luis, the brother of Bernardino Fernández de Velasco, the Constable of Castile. Apparently, the young man had turned deaf at the age of four, and this would have put him in such a position to "distinctly recognize Spanish, interpret facial expressions and converse without difficulty" (Lunier, 1805, p. 559).

The *Reducción* is a peculiar text beginning with the recognition of the "principle of this wonder of making the mute speak" (Perez, 1620), as known by the monks. Throughout the first part of his work, Bonet dealt with issues that are now pertinent to phonetics and phonology. In the background is the matter of writing, or the "graphic translation" of sounds, and the difficulties that can arise in learning how to read (Bonet, 1620, pp. 55-58). Through an exciting chapter dedicated to the "definition of voice" (Bonet, 1620, pp. 37-40) and one clarifying that the only form of "mutism" that can be solved is the one deriving from deafness, the *Reducción* mainly aims to be a method through which one can "teach the mute how to speak" (Bonet, 1620, p. 118).

Thanks to the interest he had aroused in an English ambassador visiting Madrid, Bonet's work seems to have had an essential first diffusion in Great Britain: this is where some important works were published, addressing the matter of deaf education starting from articulatory phonetics. Among these, the best known is *De loquela, sive sonorum formatione* (1653), which opens the *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae*, of the Oxford geometry professor John Wallis. He was specifically interested in the acquisition of word pronunciation, since it seemed to be the primary device to learn how to write and, thus, "decently express thoughts" through it (Wallis, 1668, p. 138 and 140).

In his view, this was the fundamental objective of deaf education. As for the spoken word itself, he considered it nothing more than "an easy task", the effect of mere articulatory practice, thus independent from hearing and for which it is sufficient to "show some position" and "the kind of movement that the throat, tongue, lips and other organs of the voice must perform" (Wallis, 1653, pp. 139-140). He was, moreover, perfectly aware that, since they lacked self-hearing, the oralized deaf were destined to lose the use of the spoken word over time or to master a highly altered and, therefore, ineffective one. It is probably no coincidence that Wallis, who was also a logician and linguist, observed that deaf people possessed their language and that it would have been appropriate for the hearing – interested in their education – to learn it.

> It will be beneficial to keep a pen and a sheet of paper handy to translate into words what the deaf show through his gestures and make him write what he means through signs since the mutes are skilled at expressing their thoughts using signs. It is essential to learn this sort of language if we want to teach them our own and to show that the word corresponds to this or that sign (Wallis, 1668, 147).[1]

Even though a school dedicated to Bonet himself was founded in Madrid, and its principles have an appreciable diffusion for much of the nineteenth century (Scagliotti, 1823, p. 17), this phase of the history of "deaf pedagogy" did not leave any significant results in terms

1 Unless differently marked, all texts were translated from the original source by the authors.

of collective benefit. Everything typically disappeared with the death of the teachers. From the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, several articles and books were published carrying a "theoretical merit" that never led to a concrete and long-lasting educational action (Scagliotti, 1823, p. 18). Moreover, the recipients of these initiatives were primarily noblemen who had no reason – and indeed no training – to spread a methodology that often passed off as prodigy, once they learned the spoken word. Concurrently, when instructors could not obtain "valid support", they usually abandoned their tasks without "leaving any trace of their work" (Scagliotti, 1823, p. 19).

A case in point is represented by the work of the German naturalist and philosopher Franciscus Mercurius Van Helmont, *Alphabeti veri naturalis Hebraici brevissima delineatio* (1657), who was convinced that the word could be "depicted". On this basis, he intended to "fix" the pronunciation of the sounds of a language (Hebrew, in the specific case) so that it "crosses all centuries, travels through all countries, is spoken by all people, without ever knowing the slightest alteration" (Van Helmont, 1657). His work counts 35 engravings, each representing the profile of a head without a cheek, showing the position of the glottis, larynx, tongue, teeth, and lips in articulating letters and syllables. Through these "paintings", Van Helmont would induce his students to replicate – in their mouths – the shape and position of the phonatory organs being depicted, to produce the corresponding sounds. Although considered a "sublime work" (Lunier, 1805, p. 561), Van Helmont's methodology had no follow-up and soon fell into the most profound oblivion.

Completely different breath and fate had the writing *Dissertatio de Loquela* by Johann Konrad Amman, a Swiss doctor practicing in Amsterdam. From the very first pages, his position is that of a man of science who sanctions the state of "curability" of mutism (Amman, 1700, p. 3). For this reason, he recalls a fact of human physiology that was already highlighted by Aristotle (*cf. supra*); that the mutes are so only because they are devoid of hearing. He states that he considers it possible to demonstrate, "with the clarity that corresponds to the principles of mathematics" (Amman, 1700, p. 80), that the "universal prejudice" according to which mutism is a fact "foreign to medicine and technology" (Amman, 1700, p. 3) is groundless. He applies a strict logical scheme to the physics of the voice, accurately described from an orthophonic perspective. After presenting language as "a mixture of different kinds of sounds" (Amman, 1700, p.12) whose variety depends on "specific organs" (Amman, 1700, p.14), he underlines that the latter are also recognizable through sight. From this, he deduces that they can "produce on the eyes of the deaf the same impression that sounds produce on our ears" and, therefore, put deaf people in a position to "distinguish words" (Amman, 1700, p.14). The confidence that consequently they would also be able to speak and "deliver clear and coherent speeches" (Amman, 1700, p. 81) is infinite, based on the contribution that can derive from an "intelligent master" (Amman, 1700, p. 81) and the extraordinary power of touch to make itself the *connoisseur* and creator of sound.

3. Origins of audiology and "physiological education"

We have so far briefly reconstructed the vital contribution that Aristotelian philosophy and biology had in the birth of a specific pedagogy for deaf people. However, his fundamental contribution to the biology of language was mainly ignored by physicians. Apparently, the first official diagnosis of deaf-mutism dates back to 1581. As many as six doctors met in Vienna to assess the condition of a young deaf nobleman, agreeing "that mutism was a consequence of deafness." Nevertheless, there are traces of approximations in the opinions about the etiology of mutism in medical works of the seventeenth century. Among the cases is that of Paolo Zacchia (Zacchiæ Pauli) who, in his *Questiones medico-legales*, argues that for most deaf people, "the nerve of speech and hearing are simultaneously paralyzed" (Zacchia, 1621-1655, L. II, Tit. I, Quaest. VIII). Even more strikingly, there are numerous medical texts that, many years after

Ashley Paston Cooper had inaugurated the surgical practice of perforating the eardrum as a treatment for deafness (1801), declare that "information about the causes of deaf-mutism" were "very vague and incomplete" (*Dictionnaire abregé des Sciences Médicales*, 1826, p. 511).

It is no coincidence that Jean Itard devoted twenty years of his life to research into the ear and its dysfunctions. This is how he founded audiology at a time when many still believed that both the tympanic membrane and the ossicles chain had nothing to do with the hearing process, and that the Eustachian tube was a sort of "buccal auditory duct" through which hearing could take place without the involvement of the external auditory apparatus (Itard, 1842, I p. 88). He thoroughly studied his predecessors and objectively described their merits and limitations. He understood and explained the role of the eardrum membrane, which is essential precisely because it is "extremely thin" and, therefore, capable of making the eardrum "more suitable for the transmission of sound waves" (Itard, 1842, I p. 82). The same is true for the ossicles, whose deterioration does not simply involve a "slightly harder hearing" but the "loss of the ability to hear the low voice" (Itard, 1842, I p. 83). Firm in his observations, he also finally provides an overview of the physiology of the ear, yet never conceals the fact that the state of knowledge remained substantially unchanged since Galen, and that the ear plays a highly complex role, placing it "in the order of the impenetrable mystery of perception and consciousness generated by the impressions exerted on the living fiber" (Itard, 1842, I p. 101). At the same time, he did not miss the intimate relationship of the ear with the mind and the brain.

> Of all the senses, hearing is the one that is affected more quickly than others by the slightest anomaly of the brain and also the one that has an intense activity of both physiological and pathological relationships with this organ. Few are the deaf people who have not experienced the reciprocal influence between their infirmity, the pain of the soul, and the activity of the mind. The profound distractions exercised by this sense in meditation and the great apprehensions of the spirit are known (Itard, 1842, I p. 407).

We must point out that Itard was not a doctor like any other. He was the doctor of the *Institut National des Sourds-Muets* in Paris, the first institution in history specifically dedicated to the education of deaf people. This means that he worked daily in a specialized environment not only to 'heal' people who were deaf or hard of hearing, but also to consider deafness as a multifaceted condition. For example, he realized how the hearing ability of the students of the *Institut* was not lost in the same way for everyone. He could verify that profound deafness was rare and that even a good proportion of people with pre-linguistic deafness retained a partial and different ability to distinguish sounds. This led him to develop a methodology for deaf people to learn speech, which he conceived and defined as "physiological education" (Itard, 1842, II p. 354). It was a training aimed 'only' at those deaf people who had some residual hearing, the goal being the recovery and enhancement of even the slightest ability to discriminate sounds, so that the 'natural' path that leads from sound to speech could be activated. The objective was to "force the voice to return the sounds that the ear would be able to perceive" (Itard, 1842, II p. 363), for which hearing would be constantly stimulated for correct pronunciation through a number of instruments producing different sounds, installed inside the *Institut*.

Following his observations, he drew some important conclusions that deaf people quickly lost the acquired "sensitivity" to those sounds and that, even if the perception remained constant, they showed extreme difficulty in distinguishing a weak sound from a strong one. Undeniably better was their relationship with the direction of the sounds and their rhythm (Itard, 1842, II p. 359). Yet, none of the difficulties with the sounds produced by inanimate

objects were comparable to the ones revealed by the voice. Deaf people who were able to recognize the musical notes "A" from "D" were, on the other hand, unable to distinguish the sound "a" from "o," which are "the most audible of vowels" (Itard, 1842, II p. 360). As for the consonants, Itard soon realized that the only way to stimulate their learning was to present these letters according to the infinite variations to which the learners are sensitive, when coupled to vowels. To this end, he meticulously classified "the numerous series of elementary sounds" of which French is composed (Itard, 1842, II pp. 370-374), finding that some consonants were better identified if paired with an 'a', while others became clearer if pronounced with an 'o'. All of this was further complicated by the fact that the hearing of every deaf person showed different sensitivity to the different sounds, which were also quite diverse. This means that for each student, new lists of syllabic sound sequences would be created, yet without the security that, passing from one word to another, the same group of sounds would consistently be recognized. (Itard, 1842, II pp. 364-367).

From within the concrete practice generated by his "physiological education", Itard confirmed the principle that inspired him, through pieces of evidence; that is, the dynamic and specific relationship existing between hearing and voice, for which all the syllables that the first would recognize, approximately and incorrectly, the second would return. It was already clear to him that the founding principle of audiopsychophonology was that sounds and words were difficult to pronounce because the ear could not recognize them correctly (Tomatis, 1963). This is why Itard, who initially discarded the use of lip reading in his methodology, decided to integrate it later, considering it a "powerful support" to "accustom the deaf-mute to recognize through the eyes the sounds that in his ear continued to be confused" (Itard, 1842, II, pp. 367-368 and 383). Aware that even by implementing this stratagem, many sounds remained inaccessible because they were invisible or indistinguishable; he also exploited the compensatory stimuli deriving from touch. For example, a hand placed in front of the mouth was used to "hear" the difference between the sound "ba" and the sound "pa", since each one "hits" the surface in a different way (Itard, 1842, II p. 384). While each new methodological achievement expanded the boundaries of this "physiological education", it also confirmed the irreplaceability of the ear and its functions.

> As long as I could have this organ as a guide in speech development, the sounds were purer and sharper. Since it was no longer this that directed the movements of the larynx, tongue, and lips, and I was forced to induce their different combinations from the outside, I only obtained vague sounds, even poorly made and whose mechanism, constantly escaping from memory, demanded new and annoying lessons every day (Itard, 1842, II p. 383).

After all, the students' reaction was often rebellious. Itard himself recalls that he occasionally had to go looking for someone here and there in the *Institut* to bring them back to the classroom of their lectures where, while apologizing, they did not fail to make it clear that "hearing and speech were not worth all the efforts they demanded" (Itard, 1842, II pp. 366-367). These were the circumstances in which, for a moment, he thought that perhaps he would have obtained more rapid and lasting results if only deaf people destined for speech education had been separated from the rest of their companions and prevented from using signs (Itard, 1842, II pp. 389-390). It was the first time someone working in a context where sign-speech bilingualism was practiced since its origins (cf. *infra*) conceived an idea unrelated to the spirit that animated that place. However, it was a thought without consequences.

Itard continued his journey respecting deaf people and, thus, marking the souls of his students, offering a gateway to the world of hearing, yet never hiding the difficulties that his

young disciples and himself encountered in the journey towards speech acquisition. Nor had he hidden the awareness that, in the case of the deaf, it was only a "very imperfect" medium that could have never played the role that a language usually plays in the life of a human being (Itard, 1842, II p. 390). The founder of audiology never turned speech into a duty, an order. He let it be an opportunity, an additional support that was imagined mainly for the hearing and their fragilities, than for the deaf as such.

> Since these are children who recover incomplete hearing, it follows that articulated sounds are equally incompletely understood and that their spoken and written signs reveal a difficulty, a slowness, and an ambiguity from which sign language is immune, which, I confirm, is the natural language of the deaf-mute and has the great advantage of allowing *them* to communicate with each other. If the education that uses hearing and speech as a tool is slower and less effective, it must be said that a more satisfactory result is obtained, a more accessible and more pleasant way of communication between the deaf-mute and society, between this unhappy child and his parents, even more unhappy than him. It is for them that I wrote these concluding pages. My wish is that they serve to alleviate the most incredible pain that can afflict a mother's heart. (Itard, 1842, II p. 391).

It is essential to highlight that this point of view not only had philosophical motivations – which would have been sufficient – but also technical reasons. Standing on empirical data, Itard experienced that the sounds that he stubbornly tried to teach to deaf people, remained sounds at best, never evolving into language. Moreover, he was never tired of repeating that it was one thing to "teach these children the elements of the word"; another, very different and "prodigious," was to train them into "talking beings" (Itard, 1842, II p. 387). Those *demi-sourds*, whose fate he had so cared for, did not hear or recognize their voice, they could not control, educate, or modulate it. He realized that for them, it was like not having "all those different cavities" that contribute to the production of the voice, at all (Itard, 1842, II p. 374-377). Their body recalcitrated more than their mind and will. After all, that was not their preferred way of relating to the world. After twenty years amongst deaf people, he realized that, taken in itself, deafness was not merely a "disease to be cured" but also one of the possible forms of human intelligence.

4. A happy bilingualism

At the end of the nineteenth century, the "International Congress for the Improvement of the fate of the Deaf-Mutes", held in Milan from September 6th to 11th, 1880, decided that the use of sign language in all schools for the deaf should be abolished. Yet, the existence of these visual-gestural languages proved that deafness could also be considered from the point of view of their people, especially when considering that many had such auditory conditions that they would not have any chance of acquiring a spoken language. This was the same conclusion to which Itard himself, as doctor and educator, arrived at through his studies.

> If I dared to manifest one of those happy projects that seized the imagination when this, going beyond all obstacles, gets lost in the search for a higher ideal, I suggest bringing together all the deaf-mutes of France and Europe in one place. At that point, [...] they would organize themselves into a society. I do not think I am wrong to state that, in a short time, it would produce men who would make themselves known for their intelligence and original talents. Nor do I think I am in error in affirming that the observation of their progress, the specific orientation of their inventiveness and intelligence, the nature of their relations with us, and, above all, of their relations with

> their children, some deaf, some hearing, represents the most surprising spectacle that can be offered to the reflection of a philosopher (Itard, 1842, II p. 331).

The happy project he refers to in this passage is his workplace, the *Institut des sourds-muets* in Paris, which is also considered the first plan of public education launched right after the French Revolution (*Organic Law on the Organization of Public Education*, October 25, 1795), but whose origins were much more humble. A few decades before the assault on the Palace of Versailles (1789) and the trial of Louis XVI (1792) marked the end of a power that had been considered indisputable, *a silent and wild venture began in a modest Parisian house*. In 1753, it was the home of a then-anonymous priest, known only to the high ecclesiastical hierarchies because he was suspected of Jansenism. His name was Charles-Michel de L'Épée, and he used to spend days visiting his neighborhood's families. During one of these visits, he was welcomed by two young deaf girls, who proved capable of "conversing" with him through visual-gestural communication (Scagliotti, 1823, p. 21).

When their mother returned, L'Épée learned that they were twin sisters who, unfortunately, had to end their education due to the death of their teacher, Father Vanin. Initially offering to find someone willing to continue their education, L'Épée decided to take care of them personally. At the time of the encounter, he virtually ignored anything concerning the education of the deaf (Berthier, 1852, p.22). Thus, with no specific preparation, and unsuccessfully attempting to retrieve suggestions from an institute in Edinburgh, he delved into his own training and devised a solution that was as new as effective. As he states in one of his texts, he based his methodology on the philosophical ideas of the relationship between language and intelligence. Given that the link that exists "between abstract ideas and articulated sounds" is not "more natural than what can exist between these ideas and written characters", it would have been "possible to instruct the deaf-mute through writing and signs" (L'Épée, 1820, pp. 64-65). In this way, he would have seen what no one had wanted or had been able to see for centuries.

He realized that if the state of deaf people had been considered only a "frightening condition for which the natural order of things did not provide a remedy" (L'Épée, 1776, p. 3), it was because the possibility of an existing alternative to spoken language to access linguistic and metalinguistic skills had been excluded. L'Épée thus concluded that such a position would have been disproved as soon as an education system using the resources from that "sign language" that deaf people mastered to perfection would have been conceived. After all, it was something that philosophy had already accepted and shared, starting from Plato (cf. *supra*), and that L'Épée proved able to transform into a new technology for education and communication. In other words, faced with the problem of ensuring that deaf people could have access to knowledge, he conceived an unprecedented solution, based on deafness as a condition that historically prepared the production of a visual-gestural protolanguage.

> Every Deaf and Mute who addresses us already has a language that is familiar to him, which is as effective as the one that comes from the exact nature and is expected of all men. He has developed a remarkable ability to use it to make himself understood by the people he lives with and to understand those who use it. He manifests his needs, desires, inclinations, doubts, anxieties, fears, pains, pangs, and so on, and he is not mistaken when others manifest such feelings. He correctly understands and executes the tasks and accurately accounts for them. It is the different impressions he felt inside him that, without the aid of rules, provided him with this language. Now, this language is sign language. If you want to instruct him, it's about teaching him the French language. What will be the fastest and easiest method? Will it not be to

> use the language that he has mastered and of which it can be said that he has become an expert because of necessity? Without ever suspecting it, every day, this individual uses verbs, nouns and adjectives, pronouns, persons, numbers, tenses, moods, cases and genders, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and (more often than us) discourse markers, precisely as those who know the language only through continuous use. By adopting his language and organizing it according to the rules of a practical method, can't we quickly lead him wherever we want? This is the path we follow (L'Épée, 1776, pp. 36-38).

Even more extraordinarily, L'Épée carried out the task that he had assigned himself in a new way: by opening a school. In a time when education was a privilege for only those deaf people whose social condition allowed hiring educators in change for laudable compensation and a pact of secrecy on the methodology in use (Chiricò, 2014, pp. 43-57), L'Épée tackled the problem with a completely different intention. France as a whole had to wait for a bloody revolution, and three years of tiring parliamentary debate before the right to education became the founding principle of the Republic (*Constitution 1793*, art. 22). He, on the other hand, immediately understood that the history of marginalization of deaf people could be interrupted only with adequate education and a collective context in which to enjoy it. L'Épée dedicated his entire life and every personal resource to this project, hoping that, it could be raised to a public task at some point. It was indeed a 'special' school, and even today, it is at the forefront from several points of view, not least because of its bilingual sign-speech nature.

L'Épée learned from deaf people and they learned from him. They actively contributed to creating the conditions for their communication and this meant that each of them could play the role of student and teacher simultaneously, in daily pedagogical practices (L'Épée, 1776, p. 44). Organized in groups of about thirty students, no one was asked to adapt to a pre-established learning rhythm. Each lesson would last four hours in winter and five hours in summer, it excluded any form of infantilization or minimization, and it was constantly interspersed with learning games, animated mainly by older students. On arrival, each new student would be taught the manual alphabet or "fingerspelling" in a couple of hours. Right after this "introduction", L'Épée would take them to play one of the most important of language games; its "use" (L'Épée, 1776, p. 110 and 116). Classes were organized by mixing students of different levels, so students were naturally inclined to welcome the newcomers and take care of them (L'Épée, 1776, p. 111). There, roles were mixed, and L'Épée would often step back, allowing the last arrived to work on their own, or leaving the students to instruct each other before bringing them back to share and compare mutual learning (L'Épée, 1776, pp. 43-45).

Deaf people who were educated in this context kept soaking in a continuous linguistic and metalinguistic bath, and by doing so, they contributed to the constant refinement of their language and the construction of their identity. As they were finally free to be deaf among deaf, and signers among signers, the students of L'Épée experienced simply being men and women among other men and women. Entering a place where they could handle a language that they recognized as their own, collectively and freely, would not restore hearing but restored their humanity. Before attending the school of L'Épée, deaf people were, at best, children to protect. After that experience, they became carriers of subjectivity, interlocutors in a technical sense. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this happened in the century and in the place where the modern notion of citizenship was born – France (Chiricò, 2016). Soon, deaf people could contribute to the intellectual debate on deafness, started by Denis Diderot with his *Letter on the Deaf-Mute for the use of those who hear and speak* (1751).

Twenty years later, in a time when the methodology set by L'Épée had been advancing in the direction of happy sign-speech bilingualism (L'Épée, 1771-1774, p. 55; 1776, pp. 221-224), never thinking of deaf education as a territory where to revel in clashes between opposing philosophies of language, Deschamps intended to define his "preference for education utilizing the word [...] starting from the devaluation of sign language" (Deschamps, 1779, p. 32). He describes it as "a complicated and long method" whose mastery would have required "a temper not within the reach of many" (Deschamps, 1779, p. 33) and whose result would have guaranteed access to the ideas of "physical things" but not to those "abstract and moral" (Deschamps, 1779, pp. 34-345). Yet, shortly after the publication of his text, Deschamps found Pierre Desloges to be a far-fetched interlocutor in terms of argumentative competence and theoretical understanding of what sign language represented. Desloges was a young man who turned deaf at the age of seven and learned this language many years later from another deaf person. He worked as a bookbinder and was educated at the school of L'Épée. Being the first deaf person in history to publish a book, he honorably earned a place in the controversy unleashed by Claude Deschamps, showing a valid knowledge of the educational model of L'Épée, and defending the fundamental role played by the deaf community as "bearers" of their language (Desloges, 1779, pp. 6-13).

> The Abbot de L'Épée [...], having conceived the generous project of devoting himself to the education of the deaf and mute, wisely observed that they possessed a natural language through which they communicated: this language is nothing more than sign language. He, therefore, understood that if he had managed to learn this language, he would have succeeded more easily in his undertaking. The success that resulted is proof of how correct this assessment was. It is, therefore, not Mister de L'Épée who created and invented this language; on the contrary, he learned it from the deaf and mute; he only corrected what was defective in this language, extended it, and endowed it with rules of organization. This enlightened Instructor considered himself a man suddenly transported to a foreign country where he wanted to teach his language. However, he understood that the best way to achieve his goal would be to learn the country's language to understand the instructions he wanted to give easily. [...] Contrary to what Abbot Deschamps (p. 37) believes, he did not need much time, nor did he have to make a great effort and a great work to give life to his education system using natural signs. Order in ideas, attention in observations, consideration of the guidance that comes from nature; here are the means he had used, here is all the magic of his art (Desloges, 1779, pp. 7-9).

The evidence shows us that despite the devastating effects the Milan congress had in the education of the deaf, L'Épée is to the history of deafness as Copernicus is to the history of astronomy. He offered humanity a new vision of the world, after which there was no turning back. His greatness consists in the simple and revolutionary fact of showing that what we need to know is already before our eyes. In the eighteenth century, many understood this; some sovereigns, many philosophers, and – above all – deaf people had the value of sign language for their education clear in their minds. Crossing the threshold of a school and finding a language had given deaf people the measure of their 'normality'. From Desloges onwards, many were those who took this responsibility, and even nowadays – as the deaf scholar Paddy Ladd claims – they are "engaged" in the daily practice of maintaining "a continuous internal and external dialogue" (Ladd, 2003, p. 3) in a visual-gestural language. After all, who knows what a deaf person feels and thinks if he is not the one to tell it to the many 'foreigners' coming from the land of sounds?

5. Conclusive remarks

As demonstrated, classical philosophy considers the inability of the deaf to acquire a spoken language in purely scientific terms. It is explained from the perspective of the biology of language, and considered 'only' as the effect of the missed activation of the functional relationship between hearing and spoken language (Aristotle). Consequently, the existence of visual-gestural languages is considered to be quite natural (Plato). In other words, when reading through the works of the founders of the philosophical reflection on language, we find no reason to explain the centuries-old belief that deaf people are incapable of accessing linguistic and metalinguistic functions, by their very nature. This belief also justified, at least partially, the design of the first 'pedagogical' actions intended for the deaf, which sprung from the point of view of hearing listeners. Specifically, they provided for a certain 'duty to hear', that is, for deaf people to behave as if they were hearing. Deaf people were asked to learn the correct pronunciation of sounds and words from supposed compensatory stimuli coming from sight or touch (Bonet, Amman).

Though this point of view was an important evolution compared to the times in which deafness was considered a condition of an irreversible impediment to knowledge, it is still far from considering deafness as a possible manifestation of the faculty of language. The change began with the concrete pedagogical action and philosophical conviction of Charles-Michel de l'Épée who, in the mid-eighteenth century, founded the first school for the deaf ever, recognized sign language as their natural language, learned it, and used it for their instruction. This included the use of verbal language, should it be physiologically accessible to the deaf, or in cases of non-congenital deafness.

This condition of "happy bilingualism", also supported by the work of Doctor Jean Itard, was soon erased. The nineteenth century opened with a very questionable season of "rehabilitative" surgeries aimed at "repairing deafness", and ended with a fraudulent congress of educators that, despite all shreds of evidence, would ban sign language from any institution intended for the deaf (Milan Congress, 1880). What seemed no longer possible, happened. Generations after generations of deaf people around the world were forced to 'educate themselves' in schools that denied the existence of deaf culture and language by learning to act as hearing. As a century of restoration and normalization, the nineteenth century condemned the glorious season of Enlightenment from this point of view as well.

Fast forward to nowadays, can we rightly say that the 'structural injustice' in the history of deafness is over? Or should we rather admit that we are still far from questioning the logocentrism and audism which are typical traits of societies with an unavoidable hearing majority, as proven by facts and political-educational choices? Unfortunately, the latter is the case. Yet, we can still turn to philosophy in search of useful answers to overcome the tone deafness suffered by "those who can hear and speak" (Diderot, 1751).

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