DCAL’s Deputy Director, Professor Gary Morgan, joined 200 Deaf parents, other professionals, government representatives and service providers on 12 June 2009 at City Hall, London, for a landmark conference to highlight and debate the serious barriers Deaf parents experience in adequately participating in their children’s school life. These barriers include the inability of staff to communicate in sign language, a lack of Deaf awareness or failure to put alternative provisions in place.

“There is still a lot further to go in removing the barriers which deaf parents face on a daily basis”
Mark Harper MP Shadow Minister for Disability

The conference was hosted by the national organisation Deaf Parenting UK. Titled “Education, Education, Education” it was the biggest conference of its kind to date, with many parents from the UK, as well as from Italy, Belgium, Cyprus and Greece. The parents spoke frankly to representatives from the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), the Department of Children, School and Families (DCSF), and the Daycare Trust and called for changes in the policies and systems that fail to address their needs as Deaf parents, whether their children are hearing or deaf themselves. Commenting after the conference Shadow Minister for Disability, Mark Harper MP, endorsed the parent’s words saying: “It was a pleasure to speak at the conference. There is still a lot further to go in removing the barriers which deaf parents face on a daily basis, particularly with education.”

The conference also provided an opportunity to learn about rights under the Disability Discrimination Act and Human Rights Act and about support and training on offer for deaf parents. Professor Morgan addressed the conference regarding DCAL’s work in the fields of education, good practice guidance and increased understanding of how people communicate through signing. He also highlighted the centre’s advocacy work and its involvement with the Deaf community: “DCAL is committed to informing parents about our research through a partnership with Deaf Parenting UK.”

The President of NAHT, Clarissa Williams spoke for many on the use of signing in the conference: “It was very salutary for me to observe how effectively the deaf community communicates using sign language and
this brought home to me the importance of expanding the use of sign language to make communication real and effective amongst all parties.” She also spoke of her sadness and shame at hearing examples of prejudices parents have faced. Other parents spoke about the wide variation in the standard of access to schools for deaf parents. Parent Cedric Moon suggested: “What each deaf parent should have is a Government backed charter setting out what minimum services can be expected from schools as a statutory right. This would help schools face up to their responsibilities.” Parent Carolyn Denmark expressed her hope that the parents’ accounts really would be taken back to the government and DCSF to identify their needs. She remarked on the attendance of Deaf parents from outside UK: “It is good to know we had Belgian and Italian Deaf people on the day and they found it useful and wanted to develop a similar model to ours in their countries. It is positive to have a network.” For further information see: www.deafparent.org.uk

Signing, dialects and video tapes

Many people outside the Deaf community may not imagine that the variation found in spoken language exists in signed languages too, including, for example regional dialects. The video documentation of such variation was the subject of the summer “Sign Language Corpora: Linguistic Issues” workshop. Other differences documented are those of gender, generation, ethnic group and social background. The workshop also discussed language change and other linguistic variations of sign languages across the world.

Held on 24-25 July 2009 and hosted by DCAL at UCL, the workshop presentations made important contributions to research that will bring improvements to sign language teaching. DCAL’s Dr Adam Schembri and colleagues presented on “Documenting and describing language variation and change in the British Sign Language Corpus.” The UCL workshop took place directly after The 2009 Corpus Linguistics Conference hosted by University of Liverpool. The two events attracted international linguistics experts concerned with “corpus linguistics”, that is the study of language as expressed in samples (corpora) or “real world” text in order to better understand the structure and use of spoken and signed languages.

The July UCL workshop was organised by the British Sign Language (BSL) Corpus Project team. This project is headed up by Dr Adam Schembri and is using video documentation of BSL to create a unique publicly accessible digital collection. Funded by a £1.2 million grant from the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC), the three-year project is associated to DCAL and draws its team from five British universities. Dr Schembri explains the importance of the project: “The corpus will help us understand the structure and use of BSL and how it develops over time. This will have a major impact on the way BSL is taught and interpreters are trained.” To read more on the presentations given in July and the BSL Corpus Project go to: http://www.bslcorpusproject.org/sign-language-corpora-linguistic-issues/
DCAL Co-director Professor Gabriella Vigliocco and UCL colleague Dr Mark Andrews received acclaim for their paper on *Learning Semantic Representations with Hidden Markov Topics Models* with a prize awarded at the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society in Amsterdam, July 29 - August 1, 2009, one of the year’s key events for the interdisciplinary field of Cognitive Science.

The prize was within the “Computational Modelling” category, awarded for the best work in the areas of perception/action, language, higher-level cognition and applied cognition; with Vigliocco and Andrews’ work chosen for its contribution to language research. Their paper presented a new computer model of how the meaning of words can be extracted from the manner in which words are used in texts. Previous models have not taken into account the order in which words were produced in a text, nor their syntactic role. The model developed by Andrews and Vigliocco takes order and syntactic information into account. As a simple example of why it is important to take syntax into account, consider words like *horse*, *cow*, *mule*. These are likely to occur as subjects of verbs like *eat* or *chew*, while words like *grass*, *hay*, *grain* are likely to occur as their objects. By taking order and syntax into account the model can easily recognize that horse and mule are more similar in meaning than horse and grass. This work has important implications for applications such as information retrieval. In designing something like Google, one needs to have the best computer algorithm for distinguishing words with similar meaning.

Three further papers were presented by DCAL researchers and collaborators. Most importantly, for the first time in its history the conference had a session dedicated to presentations on sign language, with two of these by DCAL researchers: *BSL hand and mouth slips* (Vinson, Thompson, Skinner, Fox and Vigliocco) and *British Sign Language Iconicity Effects* (Thompson, Vinson and Vigliocco).

To read any of these or others from the hundreds of presentations and posters from this vibrant international meeting go to: [http://csjarchive.cogsci.rpi.edu/Proceedings/2009/index.html](http://csjarchive.cogsci.rpi.edu/Proceedings/2009/index.html)
Sharing new understandings about the unique ways in which people who are deafblind can communicate will be the focus of a European Science Foundation (ESF) exploratory workshop taking place at several UCL venues on 5-7 November 2009. The workshop will play an important role in driving forward research that can improve the quality of life for deafblind people across the world and in understanding how all language is processed by the brain. The interdisciplinary workshop, convened by DCAL’s Director, Professor Bencie Woll, will bring together researchers in neuroscience, social sciences and linguistics from British, American, Italian and various Nordic universities, as well as representatives from Swedish and Finnish 3rd sector organisations. Titled “The Communication Of Deaf-blind People as a Model For Exploring Language Modality, Social Communication and Neural Plasticity”, the workshop will look specifically at deaf people who use sign language before later becoming blind (about 1 in 15 people born deaf) to explore such issues as how deafblind people use tactile communication, the role of visual and touch (or haptic) feedback in gesture and sign language, the role of the face, and representations of space in language. The overall aim of the workshop is to jointly develop an agenda for European-based research using deafblind communication as a model system for exploring cognition, language and interaction.

A snapshot of two presentations
Dr Riitta Lahtinen’s Haptices and haptemes - environmental information through body and touch, explores how touch-based communication methods can be developed for social rehabilitation, sign language interpreters, and for professionals in healthcare and educational settings.

C Capek, B Woll, R Campbell, K Gazarian, M MacSweeney, P McGuire, A David, M Brammer’s: The neural organisation of visual and manual language processing in adults with Usher Syndrome: FMRI evidence of cortical plasticity explores how the brain adapts to loss of vision by using visual areas of the brain to process tactile language.

DEAFBLINDNESS AND LANGUAGE
For those who are born deaf, and rely on vision for communication, losing one’s sight can have devastating effects. Deafblindness isolates people, creating difficulties with communication, access to information and mobility, but this can be improved with greater understanding of the impacts of deafblindness and appropriate support. Sign language which depends more on touch than vision is often known as hands-on signing and includes use of the deaf - blind manual alphabet.
Opening up European language learning to the Deaf community

**DCAL is involved in** an exciting European project that will provide opportunities for deaf people to learn foreign written and sign languages via the internet. The project, DEAL-TOI (Deaf people in Europe Acquiring Languages through E-Learning – Transfer of Innovation), will run for two years from this Autumn 2009 and make an important contribution to improved language teaching, improved professional training, and improved access to employment and mobility for deaf students.

The DCAL side of the project is supported by a €41,762 grant from the European Commission within the Leonardo programme and has partners at the British Deaf Association, the University of Barcelona, the Fundació Illescat (Deaf association of the Catalan region), the Italian National Research Centre on Deafness (ISTC-CNR) and the ISISS Magarotto (an Italian deaf association).

DEAL-TOI will use the way computer science technologies exploit visual information to provide access to deaf people through their dominant communication channel. The project’s aim is to create web-based materials (animations, video, and text) so that a student can use their own sign language as a tool for learning foreign written and sign languages.

The teaching materials all have two main characteristics: visually structured information and explanations in the learner’s own sign language of linguistic features of the target languages. The sign languages involved are British Sign Language (BSL), Catalan Sign Language (LSC) and Italian Sign Language (LIS) and the written languages are English, Spanish and Italian.

Through the DEAL-TOI project a deaf Italian student can learn written English and BSL by means of LIS, written Italian, or both; a deaf British student can learn written Spanish and LSC by means of BSL and written English, and so on.

DEAL-TOI is the successor to the prize-winning first DEAL project that ran between 2006 and 2008. DCAL is joining the DEAL team for the first time.
Research to find out what deaf and hard of hearing people know about genetic counselling, what they want from genetics services and what they feel the barriers are to accessing services, was the subject of a seminar on 8 October 2009. The seminar took place in the DCAL library and was hosted by DCAL’s Director Professor Bencie Woll.

The speaker was Dr Anna Middleton, Consultant Research Genetic Counsellor and Principal Investigator, Cardiff University, with her presentation titled “They just take these genes and fix ‘em together and create a fake human”. The title was a direct quotation from one of around a thousand deaf people who have contributed to research on attitudes to genetic counselling via questionnaires in British Deaf News, as well as some 30 interviews, all of these held in British Sign Language (BSL). The project was carried out with colleagues from Heriot-Watt University, Cambridge University and UCL’s Institute for Child Health.

The research has its foundation in the fact that deaf and hard of hearing adults are often interested to know why they are deaf and whether deafness can be passed on to their children. They may also be interested in knowing about other things that run in their family, e.g. inherited cancer. Such issues are routinely discussed in ‘genetic counselling’ provided by the Clinical Genetics services in the NHS. However less than 1% of deaf and hard of hearing adults ask to be referred for genetic counselling or use this clinical service.

Dr Middleton’s presentation at DCAL focused on the in-depth interviews with 30 adults and highlighted the many complex reasons why so few d/Deaf adults access counselling services. A main barrier was a lack of information: 50% of the people who took part in the research said they didn’t know what genetic counselling was before they read the study questionnaire, while 80% of people who took part said they did not know how to get a referral for genetic counselling. Participants also highlighted communication difficulties with their GP.

Other issues raised were assumptions about inheritance, mistaken beliefs of a link between present-day genetics services and eugenic practices of the past in relation to deafness, or fears about being told not to have children.

Overall the research revealed that deaf people have a whole range of attitudes towards genetic counselling and that...
A DATE FOR YOUR DIARY!

Deaf community event at Social Science Festival, 20 March 2010.

DCAL will be putting on a unique event at next year’s nationwide “ESRC Festival of Social Science” fortnight. DCAL invites all deaf community members, friends and colleagues to come along on 20 March to the Sir Ambrose Fleming Lecture Theatre at University College London for a fascinating, informative and energising day of talks, hands-on activities and experiments on the subject of “The Deaf brain and sign language”.

Hundreds of deaf people have already taken part in DCAL’s research on this subject and this is a great chance to learn more about the research outcomes and other DCAL work you can get involved in. Evening entertainment includes art and short-film competitions and signed poetry performances. The time and address will be posted in early 2010 on: www.dcal.ucl.ac.uk

Unique recognition for DCAL’s contribution to the deaf community

DCAL has been given particular recognition as the only academic body short-listed for the category of Organisational Achievement in this year’s Signature awards. Signature is a national charity that promotes excellence in communication with deaf and deafblind people. Their annual awards are given in recognition of contributions made to the deaf community. The winners will be announced in November, but final winner or not, selected alongside other organisations including the English Deaf Rugby Union and the Northampton Constabulary, the short-listing highlights DCAL’s unique contribution, focus and approach.

Key to DCAL’s nomination was recognition for its very different starting point – that of researching language and thought - not only from spoken and heard language, but from the perspective provided by deaf people’s communication, and viewing this not in terms of curing and preventing impairment. The short-listing acknowledges the important practical applications of DCAL’s work in the areas of sign (and other) language learning, social integration and identity, child development, education and health etc., but also highlights the way DCAL is helping change perceptions of Deafness. By moving away from the notion of medical “deafness” DCAL is enabling a shift of focus from “disability” to that of a diverse cultural and linguistic group.

Appropriate response from the medical profession is essential. Dr Middleton’s presentation included recommendations for health professionals across the NHS as well as for genetics professionals working with the deaf community.

DCAL’s Professor Bencie Woll applauded the research stating: “DCAL is delighted to be hosting this event at a time so soon after the debates on the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill which highlighted fears in the community. This research has an important role to play in ensuring improved communication between the Deaf community and genetic counsellors.”

Readers can request a booklet containing the full research results (including a DVD with a BSL translation) by contacting Dr Middleton: middletona1@cardiff.ac.uk

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