

## Making language visible

To mark the retirement of DCAL Deputy Director Ruth Campbell, we had a celebration for her on 11 September 2008 at UCL. At the celebration, many of Ruth's colleagues presented a summary of their work with Ruth, highlighting her important contributions to science. Ruth's main contribution has been to demonstrate that language is not just heard speech.

This is obvious when we consider signed languages, but Ruth has also highlighted that hearing people rely on visual language too: in gestures, watching speech on the lips, and the role of the face in communication. Thus, the title 'Making Language Visible' was very fitting for this celebration of Ruth's work.

## DCAL to hold workshop on the teaching of BSL in HE

A research team at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), in partnership with UCL and the University of Lancaster, have analysed a number of sign language curricula from around the globe, looking at sign language programmes from universities overseas and a large number of presently available BSL curricula in the UK. DCAL will be hosting an interactive workshop based on practical application and discussion, which will inform participants, presenters and the field of language teaching.

For more details or to register for the event please visit <http://www.las.ac.uk/events/2999>

## It's my future 2019 or even 2029

Deafness Research UK are to take forward the It's My Future competition with support from DCAL. The competition will again ask young people to think about the future and how research will impact on d/Deaf people. Entries can be up to 300 words or a 1 minute BSL video

The competition will be open to young d/Deaf people as well as young hearing people with d/Deaf family or friends in two age groups: 12-14 years old or 15-19 years old.

The competition will be launched in the new year and young people will be able to enter via the website [www.itsmyfuture.org.uk](http://www.itsmyfuture.org.uk)

Winners will be invited to receive their prizes at a reception at the House of Commons,



**"After the success of the It's My Future competition last year, I am very pleased to once again be acting as a judge and lending my support. I hope the 2009 competition will build on last year's success and attract the same high quality ideas and vision from Deaf young people about what they want to see research working on over the next twenty years." The Rt Hon Malcolm Bruce MP**

# DEAF IN THE 21ST CENTURY



As interaction with the mainstream increases, the Deaf community faces unprecedented challenges and opportunities, says DCAL Director Professor Bencie Woll

When the Government in 2003 recognised BSL as a language in its own right, it also marked that this is the language of Britain's Deaf community, an identifiable social and linguistic group. The Deaf community is constantly changing. Until the 1980s, most Deaf children were educated in residential special schools. Today, most Deaf children are educated in mainstream schools. This change has had considerable impact on the self identity of young Deaf people and their use of BSL. Developments in technology, such as text messaging and signing and subtitling on television, have changed Deaf social patterns.

There has been an enormous increase in the numbers of hearing people learning BSL and other forms of signing in recent years. Around 15,000 adults take NVQ qualifications in BSL annually. The current fad for the use of 'baby sign' with hearing children has spawned an extensive industry of books, classes and courses, and seen the introduction of signs to primary schools and to children's television.

However, this rosy picture conceals deeper causes for concern. The Deaf community hit the headlines late last year when the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill was introduced in the House of Lords and Baroness Deech commented:

"I hope that your Lordships will be pleased that the deliberate choice of an embryo that is, for example, likely to be deaf will be prevented by Clause 14."

Clause 14 states that persons or embryos that are known to have a genetic abnormality with a significant risk of developing a serious physical or mental disability, a serious illness, or any other serious medical condition "must not be preferred to those that are not known to have such an abnormality".

Strikingly, several commentary and explanatory notes and consultation documents related to the Bill also specifically singled out deaf people as the target group of this clause. A furious debate erupted in the media. As 'Stop Eugenics' (an organisation set up to campaign against the Clause) points out, the mistaken impression is given that, generally, deaf people are on a mission to use genetic technology to create deaf babies.

They point out that Clause 14 could be interpreted as coming into contradiction with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and ask who decides what diseases or conditions are serious enough to prevent people making use of assisted fertilisation.

Continued on page 3

Continued from page 2

The House of Commons Research Report on the Bill reports that Ministers were shocked by the strength of opposition from members of the Deaf community. As a result of the campaign, the Government agreed to remove references singling out deafness from the explanatory notes (though not to change the Clause itself).

It is clear that the consultation exercise carried out prior to publication of the Bill completely failed to recognise that Deaf people value their sign language and culture, rather than considering themselves as individuals with defective genes.

Any study of the Deaf community, like other minority communities, cannot be separated from a study of its relationship with the majority language community that surrounds it. At the beginning of the 21st century, there are two contrasting futures. On the one hand, there are pressures, such as the decrease in opportunities for Deaf children to use BSL with their peers as a result of the move to mainstream education, and a possible decrease in the Deaf population as a result of medical intervention and advances in genetics. On the other hand, there is increased interest and demand from the hearing community for courses in BSL, increased use of BSL in public contexts such as television, and increased pride of the Deaf community in their distinctive language and culture. **The future is finely balanced.**

( this article first appeared in ESRC's *AUTUMN 2008 SOCIETY NOW*)

## Children and Research: An agreement for good practice and

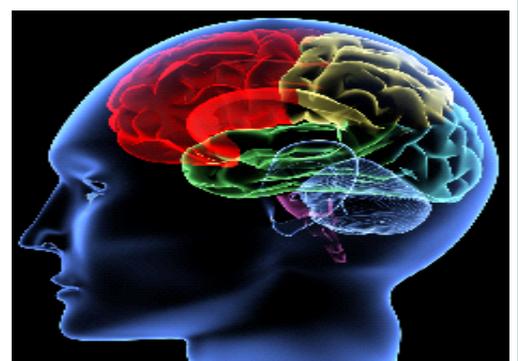
A good practice agreement has been coordinated by The Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre (DCAL) and The Sign Bilingual Consortium on involving d/Deaf children in academic research. The agreement came about following consultation which highlighted that both schools and University researchers were keen to formalise and improve their relationship and shared a desire to ensure good practice when carrying out research into d/Deaf children's development. The agreement was originally drawn up between coordinating partners based in London at DCAL and Frank Barnes School for Deaf Children but the principles in this document are applicable to all educational settings for d/Deaf children.

A wide range of organisations contributed to the agreement including City University and, Oxford Brookes University as well as the universities of Sheffield, Leeds, Bristol, Plymouth and Newcastle. Other organisations outside the higher education sector signing up include BATOD, NDCS, Frank Barnes School London, Wakefield Service for Deaf and Hearing Impaired Children, Leeds LEA, Longwill School for Deaf Children Birmingham, Elmfield School Bristol, Blanche Neville School London, Shropshire County Council and the Royal School for the Deaf Derby.

A copy of the agreement can be downloaded from [www.batod.org.uk/content/articles/research/gpa081008.pdf](http://www.batod.org.uk/content/articles/research/gpa081008.pdf)

## Bilingualism and the brain

Margaret Deuchar and her team at the ESRC Centre on Bilingualism at the University of Bangor have received AHRC funding for research networking on bilingualism and the brain. DCAL's Bencie Woll, Gary Morgan, Gabriella Vigliocco, and Chris Stone are included in the core group for this network, and Kearsy Cormier is part of the management team. The first workshop 'Neuroscientific and psycholinguistic models of bilingualism' is scheduled for 24-25 March 2009.



# DCAL researchers publish British Sign Language (BSL) norms for age of acquisition, familiarity, and iconicity

One of the reasons research into BSL has wide reaching impact is because it offers the opportunity to think about important questions about language that it may not be possible to address by just looking at spoken languages alone. Up till now this research has been hampered by the fact that there was not sufficient research on the age of acquisition, familiarity and iconicity of individual signs. In contrast there is a wealth of data on spoken or written language such as the massive British National Corpus sample of 100 million words.

DCAL researchers have now published normative data on 300 lexical signs. This will be available to other academic researchers as well as feeding into an assessment tool that will be useful for teachers, interpreters, social workers and language therapists.

Data was collected from a wide range of BSL signers all over the UK using an on-line questionnaire that could support BSL streamed video ([www.RiddleMeThis.net](http://www.RiddleMeThis.net)). This enabled anybody with access to high-speed internet access to take part in the research.

Further details about the research can be found at

<http://brm.psychonomic-journals.org/content/40/4/1079.abstract>

The norms may be downloaded from [www.psychonomic.org/archive](http://www.psychonomic.org/archive)

Still images from BSL signs. Top row, iconic signs (camera, eat). Second row, noniconic signs (boy, easy). Third row, noniconic signs (important, right). Bottom row, iconic signs referring to abstract concepts (time, think).



**Deafness Cognition and Language (DCAL) Research Centre**  
University College London, 49 Gordon Square, London, WC1H 0PD

Telephone: +44(0)20 7679 8679 Minicom: +44(0)20 7679 8693

Fax: +44(0)20 7679 8691 Website: [www.dcal.ucl.ac.uk](http://www.dcal.ucl.ac.uk)

