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Feb. 21, 2001

To: Professor John Forte, Chair
The Executive Committee of the College of Letters and Sciences

From: the Committee on Languages
Professor Vasudha Dalmia (SSEAS), Chair
Professor Richard Kern (French)
Professor Claire Kramsch (German Department and Berkeley Language Center)
Professor Ignacio Navarrete (Spanish and Portuguese)
Professor Eve Sweetser (Linguistics Dept; Celtic Studies Program; Program in Cognitive Science)

Re: the use of American Sign Language to fulfill the undergraduate language requirement of the College of Letters and Sciences

On November 29, 2000, the Committee on Languages met. Present were Professors Dalmia (Chair), Kramsch, and Sweetser, and Rob Holliday representing the L and S Executive Committee staff. Also present were Dr. Susan Rutherford (lecturer in the UCB Linguistics Department, and faculty member in the Sign Language Program at Vista College; Rutherford is a specialist in Deaf culture), and Lon Kuntze (Stanford doctoral candidate in Education, specializing in issues of Deaf literacy; Kuntze is Deaf and a native ASL signer). Dr. Rutherford and Mr. Kuntze answered the Committee's questions about ASL, and presented materials to the Committee to help us better understand the nature and situation of ASL as a language and of ASL literature as a literature. Two ASL interpreters, Dan Veltri and Patricia Lessard, were present to interpret for Mr. Kuntze. Professors Kern and Navarrete were unable to attend (Professor Kern had a conflicting teaching duty, as it was extremely difficult to schedule the meeting), but both have consulted with Professors Dalmia and Sweetser since the meeting, and examined materials distributed at the meeting.

Result: The Committee unanimously endorses the view that American Sign Language should fulfill the undergraduate language requirement of UCB's College of Letters and Sciences, and urges the College to put ASL on the list of languages which fulfill the requirement. The following criteria were relevant to this decision:

(1) ASL is a natural language, a full and complete means of expression, structurally as different from English as is Chinese or Turkish. It is one of many signed languages of the world, and is more closely related to French Sign Language than to British Sign Language. It is to be distinguished from Signed English (a method of representing English in manual gestural format) and from Fingerspelling systems (methods of representing the Roman alphabet manually). Signed English and fingerspelling are not independent languages separate from English; one is English, the other a spelling system for any language which can be spelled with the Roman alphabet. The Committee does not endorse the view that Signed English or fingerspelling proficiency (useful though both may be) should fulfill our campus' undergraduate language requirement.

Further, ASL is a language with a wide range of cultural uses. Among these uses, we note that college courses are taught in ASL on a full curriculum of subjects (Gallaudet University, in Washington, D.C., is a university whose primary language of operation is ASL), and English-language university lectures are regularly interpreted into ASL by interpreters like Ms. Lessard and Mr. Veltri.

ASL is now accepted in fulfillment of language requirements at an increasing number of other colleges and universities in the U.S. Professor Sherman Wilcox, of the University of New Mexico's Linguistics Department, has been tracking this development; his probably non-exhaustive list cites 113 other colleges and universities which accept ASL in fulfillment of their language requirements, including other University of California campuses; major state university campuses such as Ohio State, the University of Texas at Austin, U-Mass, and UNC; and private universities including MIT, the University of Chicago, Stanford and Yale.

(2) Although not every physically deaf or hearing-impaired person is part of Deaf culture, or uses a signed language, American Deaf culture is a distinct culture from the surrounding Hearing culture. It is in many ways more different from Anglo-American Hearing culture than the latter is from French or German Hearing culture. There is quite extensive scholarship on Deaf culture, folklore, and sociology. The language of American Deaf culture is ASL, which thus meets the specification that in order to fulfill the L and S language requirement, a language should represent a culture distinct from Anglo-American culture. Dr. Rutherford, whose UC-Berkeley dissertation was on American Deaf folklore, teaches courses on Deaf culture at Vista College.

(3) There exists an active tradition of ASL literature: plays, poetry, stories of many genres, and jokes. Although it was once the case that this literature was a face-to-face performance literature (like oral literatures of spoken languages), that situation has changed radically in the last two decades with the advent of easy access to video technology. Videotapes of narrative, dramatic and poetic ASL texts are now readily available. Some of the poets, narrators and dramatists are producing work of outstanding quality; and when this work reaches Hearing audiences, it has a strong impact on them. The National Theater of the Deaf has become famous nationwide. Deaf literature offers Hearing students a unique window on a culture (the humor of the Deaf community is radically distinct from Hearing jokes, for example); it also offers them a unique chance to witness and appreciate linguistic artistry in another medium besides that of sound.

Professor Susan Shweik, of our UCB English Department, informs us that she has been teaching poetry students about ASL poetics, for exactly the above reasons. Professor Sarah Taub, a 1997 Berkeley Ph.D. now on the faculty of Gallaudet University, has just published a book on metaphor and iconicity in ASL, which includes a chapter on ASL poetry. This poetry offers complex visual analogues of rhyme and meter, a great deal of fascinating metaphor, and a strong fresh voice from a community which has usually been truly unheard in neighboring Hearing culture.

Besides these genres, there are now many videotaped ASL textbooks on a variety of topics, including Deaf history and culture, but also including standard curriculum areas of the Hearing community (science textbooks, for example). Children's stories are also readily available. ASL TV stations (one exists in Fremont) broadcast news and other programming; some of this is available in video form as well. The San Francisco Public Library has a quite extensive collection of ASL literature and nonfiction videotapes available for loan.

It should be noted that although the Deaf community has generally rejected the idea of writing ASL, and preferred to remain a face-to-face community for daily interaction (using English for written communication, therefore), there is a growing tradition of SignWriting which allows non-linguists to readily transcribe ASL into written form. This may turn out to be another medium for the dissemination of ASL literature, but the Committee bases its judgment on the current videotaped ASL literary corpus.

(4) The fact that ASL is a language of the United States clearly does not make it ineligible as a fulfillment of the UCB undergraduate language requirement. Native American languages (e.g. Lakota Sioux) which are spoken nowhere but in the U.S. have been recognized as fulfilling the UCB language requirement, when it has been clear that active literary traditions are accessible to students in those languages, and will bring the students into contact with the cultures represented by those languages.

In fact, it is the Committee's opinion that, just as Spanish and Chinese may be especially practical as fulfillments of our language requirement precisely because they are also useful within California today, similarly ASL has an added utility because it is the native language of a very significant minority population within the United States. Students who learn it will surely be able to use it. It is studied by far too few Hearing students, and better intercultural understanding would surely be furthered by more bilingualism in the Hearing community. Deaf education, which has suffered severely from the paucity of really ASL-competent teachers, could gain immeasurably as well if the pool of Hearing signers increased significantly.

(5) UCB would not need to start regularly teaching ASL. The Vista College program in ASL is an example to other such programs nationwide, and resides only a few blocks from the UCB campus. Students could easily take Vista courses to fulfill their UCB language requirement in ASL. Vista instructors, including Dr. Rutherford, are also competent to examine and evaluate competence in ASL, in the case of students who have done their coursework elsewhere. There would thus be little problem in determining what should constitute the desired level of proficiency to fulfill our undergraduate language requirement.

(6) It should be added that teachers and students alike agree that ASL is a difficult and challenging language for an English-speaking student to learn. Taking an ASL course is more like undertaking to learn Arabic or Chinese than like an English speaker's experience of studying French, Spanish or German. Professor Sweetser noted that she had recently spoken to Professor Sarah Taub, a hearing Berkeley Ph.D. now teaching at Gallaudet University. Professor Taub stated that even after three and a half years of teaching and living campus life in ASL, and even though her Vista teachers considered her a prodigy during her three years in their language program while she was a Berkeley graduate student, she still daily confronts the difference between her (highly competent, fluent) ASL and real native ASL. This is entirely parallel to reports from English speakers living and working in Japanese, Chinese, or Russian.

The Vista Program has some exceptionally competent teachers, who offer solid and demanding instruction. We do not anticipate that a large number of students would be ready and able to make the commitment of time and effort involved in studying ASL, but those who did so would certainly have fulfilled the spirit as well as the letter of the L and S undergraduate language requirement.

We thus unanimously recommend to the Letters and Sciences Executive Committee that the College of Letters and Sciences at the University of California at Berkeley should add American Sign Language to the list of languages which may be used to fulfill the undergraduate language requirement for graduation.

Respectfully,

Vasudha Dalmia (Chair)

Richard Kern

Claire Kramsch

Ignacio Navarrete

Eve Sweetser

TO: The Executive Committee

From: Eve Sweetser, Subcommittee on ASL for Foreign Language Breadth Credit

As a general guiding principle, second semester courses in American Sign Language that follow the "Signing Naturally" curriculum should satisfy the L&S foreign language breadth requirement. This is a useful agreed upon standard for ASL courses and will serve us well as a benchmark form which to judge other courses. The following courses fit that description and should be given that credit forthwith. When we can verify that other courses follow this model, we will give credit to them as well.

Students needing to be examined for proficiency at the second level will be examined by a representative from the Vista program, who will provide the College with the results of those examinations. We will need to develop a formal agreement with the ASL representative from Vista establishing procedures for this.

Courses which we know follow the Signing Naturally curriculum, and which our Vista College colleagues assume to be equivalent to their ASL classes, include ASL courses offered at the following institutions:

Vista College

California State University-Northridge

California State University-Hayward

California State University-Sacramento

California State University-San Diego

UC Davis

UC San Diego

San Francisco State University - (ASL courses only - NOT Signed English courses)

Boston University

University of New Mexico

Purdue University

University of Virginia

Seattle Community College

Mesa Community College

National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at RI