Sign Linguistics and Deaf Capital

In decades past, linguistic scientists never thought that sign languages were significant. If they were not entirely socially invisible, they were at least confined to being used by those amongst 'the hearing-impaired' who were unable to speak, and perhaps even to think clearly.

Even 20 years ago, in the United Kingdom, the appearance of signing to accompany the Queen's speech on Christmas Day was thought fair game for derision and ridicule in the newspapers by television critics.

And yet, here we are today with the same Queen apparently content to be seen with a British Sign Language interpreter at her shoulder at the opening ceremony of the 2012 Paralympic Games, in front of billions of television viewers worldwide.

This presentation reviews changing perspectives amongst linguists and the wider population over the years and argues that we have arrived at a moment where it is realistic to 'reverse the polarity' and ask what the world should be learning from signers about language, cognition and human nature.

In doing so, we will have recourse to the dimension of 'active iconicity' (Sonja Erlenkamp, 2009) as part of the sign linguist's analytical armoury; encounter the phenomenon of International Signing (identified by Paddy Ladd in 1993 as an unrecognised expression of human creative capability); review Ernst Thoutenhoofd's (1996) account of 'ocularcentrism' and its re-appearance in Ben Bahan's (2008) description of 'people of the eye'; consider Dirksen Bauman and Joseph Murray's (2009) re-focusing towards 'Deaf gain'; and acknowledge the consequent, current emergence of a Bourdieusian concept of 'Deaf capital'.

The paper centres around the tantalising question: after 50 years of linguistic research and development, could we be entering 'a signing century'?