

Press Release

April 26, 2011

“Let him re-conquer language”

**The construction of deafness in Europe and
the United States, 1600–1900**

A new Max Planck Research Group, led by Sabine Arnaud, started work at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. This project focuses on the construction of deafness as a means to analyze shifting conceptions of the relationship between language and the idea of the human between the 17th and 19th centuries in Western Europe and the United States. The period closes in the aftermath of the Milano Congress, when medical doctors condemned the teaching of sign language, arguing that vocal skills should instead be the sole imperative. Soon thereafter, several European countries passed legislation ratifying these recommendations, thereby silencing three centuries of inquiry on deafness, sign language, and universal language.

The field of disability studies emerged some twenty years ago and has since become divided into numerous subfields, including deaf studies. While working on the writing of deaf-muteness and the construction of norms, this project aims to offer a historical and philosophical understanding of the way deaf-muteness has been treated both as a problem and as a key to understanding the idea of the human over three centuries. It analyzes the shifts in conceptions developed in philosophical, medical, and legal discourses and seeks to establish how “hearing speakers” have placed the use of language as central to the idea of the human. The group welcomes collaboration with those from different fields, in particular legal history, history of psychology, linguistics, disability studies, philosophy, and history of medicine.

The new feature story on the website of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science focuses on the Congress of Milano's reversal on the prevailing approach to deafness and the teaching of sign language. While affirming progress made in otology and laryngology, the Congress suddenly presented muteness as a feature to be erased. It also displaced the portrait medical examiners had been drawing of deaf people, which emphasized the psychological effects of such a disability. To such practitioners, deafness was more than an impairment; it was something to be constructed into an identity.

Toward the end of the 19th century, breaking the isolation of the world of deaf-mutes emerged as a social imperative. From 1880, sign language was shunned in the name of medical advancement, while its usage was seen as contributing to the development of a “linguistic ghetto”. Meanwhile,

defenders of sign language emphasized the danger of social isolation of the deaf due to their difficulty conforming to the expectations of spoken language. At stake in this dispute was the question of who held authority and competence to better the lives of deaf-mutes, different interpretations of the relationship between language and thought, as well as different conceptions of human nature and potential. After the Congress, those named as “deaf-mutes”, were renamed “deaf”, or “deaf-speaking”.

Sabine Arnaud works on the history of knowledge and the construction of norms. Her current focus is the analysis of deaf-muteness from legal, medical, and philosophical perspectives, privileging the analysis of various textual formats and genres. A U.S. doctorate in Comparative Literature (City University of New York) in cotutelle with a French thesis in History and Civilizations (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) and graduate theses in Philosophy and Art History (Paris VIII- Vincennes- St. Denis) have guided her approach to both visual and textual documents. She is certified by the French Comité National des Universités to teach History and Civilizations, Comparative Literature, French Literature, Epistemology, and Philosophy.

Sabine Arnaud has been a director of the Max Planck Research Group, working since November 2010 on the project, "The Writing of Deaf-Muteness and the Construction of Norms in Western Europe and the United States (17th to 19th Centuries)".

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