

Revitalization of Sign Language through Deaf Theatre: A Linguistic Analysis of an Art Form Which Combines Physical Theatre, Poetry, and Sign Language

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Abstract : Sign languages are considered endangered. The vitality of sign languages is compromised by its unique sociolinguistic situation, in which hearing parents that give birth to deaf children usually decide to cochlear implant their child. Therefore, these children don't acquire their natural language - Sign Language. Despite this, many sign languages, such as Israeli Sign Language (ISL) are thriving. The continued survival of similar languages under threat has been associated with the remarkable resilience of the language community. In particular, deaf literary traditions are central in reminding the community of the importance of the language. One example of a deaf literary tradition which has received increased popularity in recent years is deaf theatre. The Ebusu Sign Language Theatre Laboratory, developed as part of the multidisciplinary Grammar of the Body Research Project, is the first deaf theatre company in Israel. Ebusu Theatre combines physical theatre and sign language research, to allow for a natural laboratory to analyze the creative use of the body. In this presentation, we focus on the recent theatre production called 'Their language' which tells of the struggle faced by the deaf community to use their own natural language in the education system. A thorough analysis unravels how linguistic properties are integrated with the use of poetic devices and physical theatre techniques in this performance, enabling wider access by both deaf and hearing audiences, without interpretation. Interviews with the audience illustrate the significance of this art form which serves a dual purpose, both as empowering for the deaf community and educational for the hearing and deaf audiences, by raising awareness of community-related issues.

Keywords : deaf theatre, empowerment, language revitalization, sign language

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