BOOK REVIEW

Teckenspråkiga döva, Identitetsförändringar i det svenska samhället (The signing deaf – changes in identity in Swedish society).

By Päivi Fredäng

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Aristotle believed the deaf were uneducable. Because they could not hear, they could not learn. Speech was long viewed as the source of language and abstract thought. One widespread opinion was that "the deaf should speak!" At a meeting of teachers of the deaf in Milano in 1880, it was established that "speech is a gift from God." This proclamation was viewed as a clear setback for the first initiatives within the signing movement. The oralists, who felt that the deaf should learn spoken language, had gained ground, and this remains the predominant view worldwide. For example, in many countries sign language is not used in schools for the deaf.

Yet in Sweden something special has been happening. In 1981, Sweden was the first country in the world to recognize sign language as the native language of the deaf. It was also acknowledged that the deaf have the right to be bilingual in sign language and Swedish. In 1983, there was an important change in the curriculum, stating that instruction of deaf children shall be provided in sign language. In Päivi Fredäng's doctoral

dissertation, this period of time – the beginning of the 1980s – constitutes a central point of intersection. Her questions include: How have deaf individuals' self-conceptions changed? What are the differences between those who attended school during the oralist period and those who did so during the sign language period? How is deafness viewed?

Päivi Fredäng has approached these questions at two levels. The first level comprises "understanding oneself" and is based on interviews with deaf individuals. The second level deals with organizational issues. Fredäng has followed 50 years of textual material from a Swedish magazine for the deaf ("De Dövas Tidskrift") as well as the meeting minutes of two associations for the deaf. How are the self-conceptions of the deaf represented here, officially and organizationally?

Comrades in fate

Fredäng conducted interviews with deaf individuals from two generations: the first group was born between 1945 and 1955, the other between 1973 and 1978. She interviewed ten informants from each age group. The interviews were conducted in sign language, videotaped and transcribed into Swedish.

Members of the older group had attended boarding school and received speech training. Sign language was not recognized. The older informants reported that they were not allowed to sign during school although they were sometimes, but not always, allowed during recess. They told about the "care providers" at the boarding school and about the severe punishments for signing. They described how they were given ready-made phrases to use when writing letters home. Thus even personal letters were part of their training: "It's raining. I'm fine. How are you?" The situation for members of the younger group was, however, different. During their school years, instruction was given in sign language. The older informants described communication within the family as explicitly instrumental: factual information, orders, explanations, but seldom small talk about emotions.

The experience of speech training was one marked by disapproval. Moreover, such training was of very little use. On the other hand, the older informants stressed their strong feelings of comradeship. Those who are met as they were by others' lack of acknowledgement tend to stick together. They called themselves comrades in fate. The younger informants, however, did not share such feelings of common fate.

Both groups reported experiencing varying degrees of selective interaction. You choose your companions, and those you choose confirm your own self-conception. Naturally enough, this is particularly true for marriage: nine of ten deaf individuals marry another deaf person. Many of the younger informants, however, still had no partner and did not see the circumstances of their own marriage as predetermined. They believed in love's power to overcome differences.

"They look down on me"

One interesting part of the dissertation is called "Misjudgment". In various ways and occasionally without any ill intent, the surrounding world communicates signals to a deaf individual that make him/her feel that "they look down on me, I'm the one with the problem." This misjudgment can occur in the form of branding: people bully, imitate and stare. Branding misjudgments can also be overprotective: "he's lucky to still have his parents." Fredäng points out another type of misjudgment – communicative: the surrounding world is simply not interested in whether communication is successful. The deaf individual is forced to remind and nag. The third type is institutional misjudgment and refers to the belittlement found in society's institutional regulations. A person has been misjudged when his/her given rights cannot be used. One example is the lack of an interpreter when the right to one exists.

In the chapter entitled "The creation of deafness," Fredäng provides a summary of the social types she has arrived at: Some of the older informants look down on themselves and have become *preservers*, keeping to themselves. There is another group, the *intermediaries*, who are ambivalent toward their affiliation. They try to bring the hearing and the deaf world together. The last group is the *strugglers*, who see deafness as a cultural difference and *not* as a handicap.

Among the younger informants are the *conquerors*. They sometimes criticize the strugglers. "It's as if we only belonged in our own world." The young wish to test their opportunities even among the hearing. Fredäng calls the conquerors' attitude toward life postmodern. Finally, another group is called the *nullifiers*. They are marginalized from both the deaf and the hearing communities.

From A Quiet Christmas to Deaf Power

The chapter entitled "Paradigms in the deaf community" deals with how the deaf have described themselves on an organizational level in De Dövas Tidskrift as well as in meeting minutes of two associations for the deaf, one in Härnösand and one in Uppsala. The time period covered is 1945-1995. In the material, Fredäng observes three cultures: *the subculture, the counterculture,* and *the shared culture.*

The *subculture* was evident at the beginning of the studied period. In the material, the deaf described themselves in negative terms. They wrote: "the roots of our incapacity can be found in our upbringing." The word "deaf mute" was used. Deaf individuals' distrustfulness, listlessness, fear and inabilities were seen as consequences of stigmatization from society. A special issue of the magazine was entitled "A Quiet Christmas", and topics included "cultural adversity." The associations for the deaf stressed that the isolation of deaf mutes must be broken; such associations allow the deaf to meet with their comrades in fate. Emerging from this early period is a self-deprecatory and dismal picture – what Goffman called a "spoiled identity."

During the 1960s, *the counterculture* emerged, and with it the struggle for the right to be deaf. In a publication of the Swedish National Association of the Deaf in 1974 (SDR Kontakt, 1974), it is stated that no deaf individual can develop according to the norms of the hearing. The phrases "Deaf Awareness" and "Deaf Power" were coined. One journalist wrote in SDR Kontakt that Deaf Power implies that if anyone in the room is deaf, everyone should sign. There were strong arguments against integration. During this period there was a turning point with regard to sign language. The Uppsala meeting took place in May 1970 and was seen as a victory. Two hundred parents of deaf children participated, and the experts stressed the advantages of sign language for deaf children's development. The counterculture took its point of departure in a refusal to be recognized as deviant. They did not wish to become pale copies of the hearing. In 1981, the counterculture's most important goal was achieved – the acknowledgement of sign language.

Following the counterculture was the *shared culture,* which was characterized by individualism. In the shared culture, it was above all young people who opposed the collective notion of deaf awareness. Instead, distinct groups crystallized: deaf women, deaf parents, deaf academics, deaf golfers, etc. New challenges, for example cochlear implantation and the debate on this procedure, did emerge, causing the pendulum to swing back toward the counterculture.

Opinion

"The signing deaf" is a rich dissertation based on exciting empirical material. Fredäng has covered a large field, from the individual level of family and school, to local and national associations, and further to how society addresses various issues.

There is, however, a danger in Fredäng's approach to this complex of problems. The criticism I present here does not apply only to this dissertation, but is more general. When identity work among oppressed groups becomes a fact, it is naturally important to describe these processes. Identity work means that a group works to create for itself an integrated cultural image. A consensus is reached within the group on which issues are important. Thus, when studying such groups, it is easy for even the researcher to exclude that which is outstanding and fails to fit into the picture. My criticism here concerns the selection process. Fredäng has excluded certain deaf individuals, among others the "isolated deaf." Moreover, Fredäng discusses several deaf individuals who were unwilling to participate, namely older men working in hearing environments. Her explanation for this group's refusal is that they are "characterized by a reluctance to become involved in the unfamiliar, a fear of being misunderstood or a lack of understanding of the written information." As a reader, one is surprised. Why would older men working in hearing environments be particularly afraid of being interviewed? It would have been interesting to know more about why they declined to participate.

I was also able to discern the same tendency as regards interpretation of the interviews. One of the interviewees is described as "nullifying," a term that refers to a psychological defense mechanism. This description is highly negative: The nullifier confirms his/her identity by annihilating the importance of others. Only one person, Anders, is called a nullifier. Among other things, Anders says in the interview: "it's nicer talking with hearing people than with deaf people. The deaf are always going on about the same thing. Nothing new you know. We don't have any common interests. Deaf people only want to do sports. I'm just indifferent." He continues: "For me if I don't have any planned goals then I'm free. That means I can choose different things all the time. Having goals means things are difficult and I have to adapt, you see. I want to feel free." Thus, Anders' outlook on deafness and on himself did not correspond with the identity for which the group worked.

Discredit?

Fredäng shows sensitivity in her interpretation of the interviews. She perceives interesting phenomena such as "explained fellowship" as a discredit. Explained fellowship occurs when a deaf individual is among hearing individuals who must explain, e.g., what everyone is laughing at or the point of the story, etc. The deaf person is part of the community, but only after the others. Thus explained fellowship can be experienced as exclusion. Another example mentioned by Fredäng is "particularization," which implies that a single individual in the belittled group is viewed as being particularly capable. Surprising comments from the hearing, such as "you dance so well even though you're deaf," are particularizing. Fredäng calls this a communicative misjudgment. I praised this as a sensitive discernment of something that was well intentioned on the part of the surrounding world, but perceived as negative by the deaf individual. During the dissertation defense, however, Fredäng stressed that it was not at all the case that everyone experienced explained fellowship or particularization as discrediting. Some viewed it as positive communication on the part of others. As a reader, however, one wishes to look more closely at the question: When, for example, is particularization perceived as negative and when is it perceived as positive?

The dissertation is exhaustive and was exciting to read. For the most part I find that Päivi Fredäng shows a genuine desire to include dissidents, conflicts, etc. But it is difficult to present a picture of tendencies in a process and at the same time attend to things that *deviate* from such tendencies. I wish, however, to stress the need for such vigilance: Is homogeneity depicted at the expense of treating certain dissidents unfairly in the descriptions?

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