Should I say hearing-impaired or d/Deaf? A corpus analysis of divergent discourses representing the d/Deaf population in America

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1 Introduction

Terminology used when referring to d/Deaf individuals in America has long been a source of strife for this community. A tight-knit, self-identified cultural and linguistic minority, this group has been characterized as defective for generations. The term 'hearing-impaired', in particular, has worn a mask of political correctness and decency despite the d/Deaf community's open repudiation of it. d/Deaf individuals, as well as advocates and allies of the d/Deaf community, believe the term 'hearing-impaired' promotes the same agenda popular years ago: one where d/Deaf people need the help of hearing people to compensate for their impairment and where the ultimate goal should be to mend said impairment in order to participate in society as a normal person would.

This clear divide in preferred terminology for the d/Deaf population in America indicates a possible divergence in discourses; however, what remains to be seen is whether or not these terms entail the use of a specific discourse that is in direct contrast to the opposing term. Therefore this analysis uses corpus techniques to explore a wide range of contemporary American English texts as a way of identifying patterns in the discourses surrounding each term. The findings will assist in determining what different discourses exist, specific aspects of said discourses, and which of them could be considered to be a discourse of hegemony.

2 Background on d/Deafness, Impairment, and Discourses

Constructions of d/Deafness have been articulated in different ways (Lane, 1995; Brueggemann, 1999; Rosen, 2003), though Rosen (2003) takes a unique approach, identifying 'jargons' used in the constructions of d/Deafness. These 'jargons' are "developed by the social institutional stakeholders that work with d/Deaf people in accordance with their agendas and practices" (p. 922) and are there to aid those social institutional stakeholders in identifying and talking about d/Deaf people. These 'jargons' stem from constellations of professions and serve to support the agenda of those institutions (Rosen, 2003, p. 923). Two of these constellations are informally referred to as the 'healing' professions (i.e. physicians, etc.) and the 'helping' professions (i.e. educators, those working in the social services, etc.); they are known formally as the 'jargons' of essentialism and social functionalism, respectively. The third constellation is made up of humanists and social scientists, those who could be considered of the critical or activist stance, and is known as agency (Rosen, 2003).

The characterizations Rosen creates in his jargons are a good match for the representations of d/Deafness in society, though the term 'jargon' does not serve much use in discourse analysis. Since these 'jargons' are reflective of social institutional constructions, which can be considered social practices, and are used both in accordance with the producer's agenda and also in identifying deaf people while they are being talked about (Rosen, 2003), it can be said that the construction is used to build the jargon, but is also represented by it. This suggests a dialectical relationship such as what is seen with discourse. As such, the three 'jargons' defined by Rosen will be considered 'discourses' in the discussion of this research.

It is in the discourse of essentialism where the normalizing paradigm so ubiquitously used to refer to the Deaf community seems to have gotten its start. This paradigm is that which encapsulates the notions of intervention and rehabilitation; and maintains the position that such a condition (i.e. d/Deafness) entails both a physical and social deficiency that prevents an individual from communicating, where the only accepted avenue for communication is an oral/aural one, and necessitates treatment to restore this individual to societal norms (Rosen, 2003).

It should be noted here that my analysis intends to use the term discourse in the spirit of Fairclough (1995), taking on the form of social action in which specific discourses are avenues for communicating and constructing social situations or positions based on the discourse producer's reality and perspective on the world. Using a discourse of essentialism/social functionalism conveys a conventionalized ideal, an ideology in which the d/Deaf population is represented as abnormal and as such unequal in the estimate of the general society. Therefore, the d/Deaf community's identity, when identified as 'hearing-impaired', appears to be situated by the hearing population, setting them apart in some

way through a social representation of otherness and a discredited status in the world of normal (Oliver, 1990; Hughes, 1999; Beauchamp-Pryor, 2011). This will be demonstrated through the findings from the corpus analysis.

3 Corpus and Methods

This analysis investigated the presence of discourses surrounding the representation of the Deaf community in America, specifically with the reference terms 'hearing-impaired' and 'd/Deaf', comparing and contrasting the usage of these terms in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The COCA provides the best platform for data collection from a general corpus as it is a well-balanced representation of contemporary American English, including 450 million words between 1990-2012. Having a corpus that contains more recent texts is important to this study since the term hearing-impaired is a somewhat new term, becoming more popular in the 1990s until present after the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act, where this term is highlighted.

Within the COCA, I researched both terms, 'hearing-impaired' and 'd/Deaf', examining the various concordances and collocates of each. The idea behind looking at concordances and collocates in terms of discourse analysis, and in a larger sense, critical discourse analysis, was to uncover patterns within the discourse, which suggest ongoing connections between terms and perhaps with that reveal certain ideologies present in their discourse. These patterns, since they have emerged from a large range of texts and not just one individual one, may be better evidence for claiming the presence of a discourse of hegemony (Baker, 2006). The patterns discovered through these examinations shed some light on the discrepancy between each discourse and will be discussed further in the following section.

4 Findings and Discussion

In looking at the results from the corpus searches, it becomes quite evident that a discourse of essentialism or social functionalism as described above appears to be employed within the concordance lines of 'hearing-impaired'. In general, the contexts in which this label is found establish a negative value judgment on the individuals being described. Specifically, they are portrayed as *disadvantaged*; are seen to be helpless; are found to be in an undesirable situation, shown with the phrase *wishing he hadn't been born hearing-impaired*; are

constantly dichotomized with *normal* people; and are more often than not treated as *subjects*. Overall, the occurrences of 'hearing-impaired' within the COCA display a lack of agency and a positioning of this population that is inferior to their *normal* hearing counterparts.

Additionally 'hearing-impaired' individuals are included among groups often deemed helpless and disadvantaged in our society, those in need of some intervention or rehabilitation such as *slow learners*, the *mildly retarded*, the *learning disabled*, the *emotionally disturbed* and the *underachievers*, to name a few. There is discussion about finding a '*cure*' for their *physical challenge*. Within the list of collocates for the term 'hearing-impaired', we find *subjects* at the very top of the list, followed by *normal* and a great deal of terms associated with speech and hearing. This is not to suggest that these are the only terms found to co-occur with 'hearing-impaired', though they do suggest a pattern in discourse, one which pits this population against the whole of society and sets them apart as an 'other'.

The data collected from a search on 'd/Deaf' yielded quite different results. While there were some examples of discourses similar to what was seen with hearing-impaired, namely those where there was a focus on terms associated with speech and hearing, there were many more occurrences that presented the d/Deaf population with agency and more as a collective group. This is most notable in the collocates, which include such terms as *community*, *culture*, *language*, and *sign*. Also, the concordance lines showed 'd/Deaf' people to be dichotomized with *hearing* people, rather than *normal* people, as was seen with hearing-impaired. While the data for 'd/Deaf' did not suggest only one discourse matching that of agency, this discourse was a prominent one setting it apart from 'hearing-impaired' where this discourse was almost completely absent.

5 Concluding Remarks

The above findings suggest diverging discourses in the representation of the d/Deaf population in America. It presents some convincing evidence that the term hearing-impaired can function as a discursive tool to separate this group of people from general society until they have been restored to conditions perceived as normal. While this study is not completely comprehensive in describing the exact appearance of discourses surrounding each of these labels, it does expose a clear inconsistency in how this population is represented based on which reference term is

employed and therefore warrants further investigation, which I am currently undertaking. This study, as well as future research, is good testimony to show how a change in terminology can change the ideology illustrated by the discourse producer.

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