Another Language for the Deaf

BY MARGALIT FOX

I MAGINE a language that can't be written. Hundreds of thousands of people speak it, but they have no way to read a newspaper or study a schoolbook in the language they use all day long.

That is the situation of the quarter-million or more deaf people in North America who primarily language is American Sign Language. Although they form a vast linguistic minority, their language, as complex as any spoken one, has by its very nature defied most attempts to write it down.

In recent years, however, a system of graphic symbols based on dance notation has allowed the world's signed languages to be captured on paper. What's more, the system's advocates say, it may furnish deaf children with a long-sought bridge to literacy in English and other spoken languages, a great struggle for signers.

But despite its utility, the system, called Signed English, has yet to be widely adopted by deaf people: for many, the issue of whether signed languages need to be written at all remains an open question. "The written form is used by a small number of educated people," Valerie Sutton, the creator of Signed Writing, said in a telephone interview from her office in La Jolla, Calif.

Little by little, though, Signed Writing is gaining footholds in individual homes and classrooms in America and abroad. Dissimulated by Ms. Sutton's non-profit organization (www.signedwriting.org), it can now be found in 27 countries, including Italy, South Africa, Nicaragua, Japan and Saudi Arabia.

American Sign Language is not English. Signed English, spoken in the United States and parts of Canada, is an elaboration of the grammatical and phonological constructs not found in English (in certain cases, it even reverses them). For deaf children whose first language is A.S.L., English—that is, written English—must be learned as a foreign language, just as a hearing person might study Sanskrit. But there is a catch: "The letters of the alphabet are based on sounds they can't hear," Ms. Sutton explained. For this reason, many deaf students never become fully literate in English, a perennial concern of the National Association for the Deaf. According to a long-term study by the Gallaudet Research Institute in Washington, deaf high school seniors score, on average, just below the fourth-grade level.

Dawn McReynolds of Clinton Township, Mich., ran into the problem three years ago, when she discovered her 13-year-old did not know what "bread" meant. Born deaf, and fluent in A.S.L., Nicole McReynolds, then a sixth-grader in public school, was clearly bright. But standardized tests put her academically at a first- to second-grade level. As her stunned mother discovered after she pulled Nicole from the classroom and began home schooling, though Nicole had learned by rote to spell simple English words—"bread," "mag," "yell"—she had little idea what they actually meant.

"Anything I could draw a picture for, she was O.K. with," Mrs. McReynolds said. "But things like "what," "where," "when," "who"—she had no idea. It was horrible. It was as if she'd never been educated.

AVOCATES of Signed Writing hope the system can help bridge the literacy gap. Though no formal studies have yet been published, anecdotal evidence from parents and teachers suggests its potential. "It's made English come alive for her," said Ms. McReynolds, who introduced Nicole to Signed Writing two and a half years ago, after seeing it on television.

Where spoken languages operate acoustically, signed languages work spatially. Each sign is a compact bundle of data, conveying language in form by three primary means at once: the shape of the signer's hands, the location of the hands in space and the direction in which the hands move. (Facial expression also matters.)

Despite the system's technical savvy, it is not without its detractors among the Deaf community, many of whom maintain that signed language is the only suitable way to communicate. "Signed Writing isn't signed English," said Karen van Heek, a linguist who helped develop Signed Writing. "But with sign language, it's the reverse: we're trying to get a three-dimensional language compressed down onto two-dimensional, flat paper."

Other writing systems have been created in A.S.L., during its century-and-a-half-long history. Some, used by linguists, are too abstract for everyday communication. Another, developed recently at the University of Washington, is designed to help teach written English but not to handle literary traffic, like novel-writing, entirely in A.S.L.

Signed Writing, which grew out of a system for transcribing movement that Ms. Sutton developed in the 1970's to note choreography, can be handwritten, or typed using special software. Written vertically, it uses simple geometric forms to collapse a sign's three basic parameters—hand shape, location and movement—into a streamlined icon, topped by a stylized face.

Few embraced the system at first. Many signers, mindful of a long paternalistic his- tory of hearing people tampering with A.S.L., questioned Ms. Sutton's motives. Educators feared it would deter the deaf from learning English.

Though hostility has subsided, Signed Writing is used today by only a small fraction of the deaf population, between 1,000 and 8,000 people worldwide. Ms. Sutton estimated. As Jane Fernandez, the provost of Gallaudet University, the prestigious school for the hearing impaired, said in an e-mail interview: "There are many deaf adults who were raised with Sign Language in their homes and schools and who have learned to read and write English quite fluently. They were able to navigate between Sign Lan- guage and English, without a system for writing their signs down."

While acknowledging Signed Writing's po- tential, Ms. Fernandez, who is deaf, expressed doubt about the larger need for written A.S.L. English is the language of society," she wrote. "It works well for us and I believe it is important for the deaf to use the language in which we write in America."

Before signing off, Ms. McReynolds said, "I didn't think she would be able to live an independent life. These days, Nicole is in college and experimenting with Signed Writing. We believe that Signed Writing is going to accompany her through her life," her mother said. "There is so much more hope for the future for her because she has this ability now."
The opening page of the storybook "Goldilocks," told in American Sign Language by Durline Clark Gunnsauls, a left-handed signer, and written in S ignWriting. A word-for-word English translation appears to the left of each frame; in idiomatic English, the passage reads, "The title of this story is 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears.'"