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## Does Language Determine Our World's Borders? The Deaf Beyond the Pale

*The limits of our language are the limits of our world*  
Ludwig Wittgenstein

### Abstract

"If not in words, how did she organize her thoughts?" asks contemporary American writer André Aciman thinking of his deaf mother. In other words, how did she organize her world – one could ask, since even if not consciously, it is often assumed that "the limits of our language are the limits of our world." Taking Ludwig Wittgenstein's well-known dictum as a starting point, I would like to present an interdisciplinary approach to the subject, set on the border of comparative literature, linguistics, and medicine. In my paper, using the works of Plato (*Cratylus*), Denis Diderot (*Paradox of Acting*), Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (*Philosophical Writings of Etienne Bonnot Abbé de Condillac*), Oliver Sacks (*Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf*), and others, I focus on how people perceive the borders (limits) of our world through the prism of language. Is language just a prosthesis, a grafted limb one can live without? Do hands speak more intimately than words? Or maybe deafness is more of a disability than blindness? Is hearing essential for creating memory, allowing comparison, judgment and association of ideas? From a medical point of view, it is impossible to develop

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speech without hearing. So how does not hearing and therefore not speaking limit our world? Does it at all?

**Keywords:** language, speech, sign language, sensualism.

## Introduction

*Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*), which is part of the *Mishnah* - the first major work of Rabbinic literature assembled in the first and second centuries CE - refers to speech as a creation tool.

בְּעֶשְׂרֵה מְאֻמֹּת נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם. וְיָמָּה תִּלְמֹד לֵאמֹר, וְהָלֵא בְּמֵאֻמָּר אֶחָד יְכוּל לְהִבְרָאוֹת, אֲלֵא לְהַפְרֵעַ מִן הַרְשָׁעִים שְׂמֵאבְדִּין אֶת הָעוֹלָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּעֶשְׂרֵה מְאֻמֹּת, וְלִתְּנוֹ שֶׁכָּר טוֹב לְצַדִּיקִים שְׂמֵאֲמִינוֹ אֶת הָעוֹלָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְּעֶשְׂרֵה מְאֻמֹּת:

With ten utterances the world was created. And what is learned - couldn't it have been created by one utterance? Rather, [it was done this way] in order to punish the wicked who destroy the world that was created with ten utterances and to give reward to the righteous who sustain the world that was created with ten utterances. (*Pirkei Avot* 5:1)

It is also written in the *Psalms*: “By the word of the Lord, the heavens were made” (*Psalms* 33:6). Clearly, the above relates the act of creation to words and the action of speech rather than to creation imagery of a potter molding clay or a carpenter with wood and plane. Based on that, the concept of the metaphysical influence of the Hebrew alphabet was created, called Gematria, which is an alphanumeric code of assigning a numerical value to letters of the Hebrew alphabet and therefore looking for relations between words of identical numerical values (Schechter & Levias, 1904, p. 589). Contemporary theology and culture are therefore based on the assumption that language influences human understanding of the world within the natural order.

Speech requires language. And if there is no phonic language without hearing, our interest focuses on senses and *sensualism*. This ideogenetic issue was already put forward in Greek philosophy (Stoicism, Epicureanism) and further developed by the Sensualists (John Locke, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac) and the English Associationists (Thomas Brown, David Hartley, Joseph Priestley). *Sensualism* in philosophy refers to the ethical doctrine that feeling is the only criterion for what is good (“18th Century French Aesthetics”, 2013). Important in this context is *moral sensualism* recognizing sensual emotion, pain and pleasure, as the only criterion of good and evil. Pleasure is good and pain - evil. One should strive for pleasure and avoid pain. In epistemology it is a doctrine whereby sensations and perception

are the basic and most important forms of true cognition. It was Étienne Bonnot de Condillac who in his work *Traité des sensations* (1754) imagined the statue animated by a soul into which no sense-impression has ever penetrated. He considers the statue as a kind of vehicle for the human consciousness. He uses it instead of a human being to describe the human psyche and the processes occurring in it. Condillac unlocks the statue's senses one by one, beginning with smell, as the sense that contributes least to human knowledge. The statue's smell-experience will produce pleasure or pain; and pleasure and pain will thenceforward be the master-principle which, determining all the operations of its mind, will raise it by degrees to all the knowledge of which it is capable.

Even though Condillac does not rate the sense of smell very highly, he admits that it creates memory. And that reminds us of Proust and the taste of a madeleine cake dipped in tea which inspires a nostalgic incident of involuntary memory (Proust, 1913/2003). Noteworthy in this context is that a hundred years later neurological research proved him right (Marin (Curley), 2015). Sensations like smell or taste do create memories. And from memory springs comparison, which is nothing more than giving one's attention to two things simultaneously (like smelling a rose and remembering a carnation). Further considerations lead Condillac to the conclusion that "as soon as the statue has comparison, it has judgment" (Abbé de Condillac, 1887). Comparisons and judgments become habitual, are stored in the mind and formed into series, and thus arises the powerful principle of the association of ideas. With this concept, Condillac opposes John Locke, the seventeenth-century English philosopher and physician: "He should have noticed that judgments are associated with all our sensations, no matter which organ delivers them to our soul" (Abbé de Condillac, 1887, p. 275).

The association of ideas is the foundation and origin of Condillac's main concept and input to philosophy: *sensualism*, the theory stating that all knowledge is derived from the senses and that no ideas are innate ("Étienne Bonnot de Condillac", 2017). And since Condillac considers senses the basis of intelligence, he also perceives language as the vehicle by which senses and the emotions resulting from them are transformed into higher mental faculties. He believes that the structure of language reflects the structure of thought. Denis Diderot develops this concept stating that the soul covers everything at once, but to express it in language one needs to perform decomposition (Diderot, 1751/1883). First comes the sensual experience, then the memory, comparison and judgment lead to creating the association. Reading symbols brings us to understand reality. This philosophical background, expressed in the works of both Condillac and Diderot, is the basis for the following consideration: The soul is mute. Language is a tool for

translating the state of the soul. But if the soul is mute and it needs language for translating its state, how can this happen if not only the soul but also the person/the human being is mute, deaf and mute?<sup>1</sup>

### Analysis: Practical Approach

A contemporary and practical interpretation of Condillac's eighteenth-century theories can be found in *Deafness* by David Wright, a South African poet and novelist who lost his hearing when he was seven. Wright says:

My father, my cousin, everyone I had known, retained phantasmal voices. That they were imaginary, the projections of habit and memory, did not come home to me until I had left the hospital. One day I was talking with my cousin and he, in a moment of inspiration, covered his mouth with his hand as he spoke. Silence! Once and for all I understood that when I could not see I could not hear. (Wright, 1969, p. 22)

Olivier Sacks in his work *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf* comments on the above concept, saying: "There is, of course, a 'consensus' of the senses - objects are heard, seen, felt, smelt, all at once, simultaneously; their sound, sight, smell, feel all go together. This correspondence is established by experience and association" (Sacks, 1989, p. 6). From a medical point of view, the philosophical theory of Condillac "takes place" in the association areas of the cerebral cortex, including the secondary auditory cortex. The main components of the hearing mechanism (divided into four parts by its function) are: Outer Ear, Middle Ear, Inner Ear, and Central Auditory Nervous System. The last part of the auditory pathway (Central Auditory Nervous System) consists of the Eighth Cranial Nerve or the so-called "Auditory Nerve" (also: vestibulocochlear nerve or auditory vestibular nerve). It carries signals from the cochlea to the primary auditory cortex, continuously processing them along the way. The second part is the auditory cortex – Wernicke's area within the temporal lobe of the brain. It is where sounds are interpreted based on experience / association. Due to the proper functioning of these areas we are capable, after receiving and processing sensory information, of creating memory, allowing comparison, judgment and association of ideas (Śliwińska-Kowalska, 2005). The question that emerges here, especially considering the Deaf (Berke, 2010)<sup>2</sup> should

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<sup>1</sup> In this case the deaf and mute, which means that the argument refers to people with congenital (prelingual) deafness. (author's note)

<sup>2</sup> Following Padden, Humphries and Berke, I adopt the practice of capitalizing the *Deaf*, as a sign of treating this group as a cultural minority. When used as a label for the audiological condition, the word *deaf* is written with a lowercase d.

be: Is hearing truly essential in creating memories, allowing comparison, judgment and association of ideas? And, therefore, is it essential in the perception of the world? If so, we would have to admit that deaf people are not able to fully develop their intellectual potential. Olivier Sacks writes:

People tend, if they think of deafness, to think of it as less grave than blindness, to see it as a disadvantage, or a nuisance, or a handicap, but scarcely as devastating in a radical sense. Whether deafness is 'preferable' to blindness, if acquired in later life, is arguable; but to be born deaf is infinitely more serious than to be born blind – at least potentially so. For the prelingually deaf, unable to hear their parents, risk being severely retarded, if not permanently defective, in their grasp of language unless early and effective measures are taken. And to be defective in language, for a human being, is one of the most desperate of calamities, for it is only through language that we enter fully into our human estate and culture, communicate freely with our fellows, acquire and share information. If we cannot do this, we will be bizarrely disabled and cut off – whatever our desires, or endeavors, or native capacities. And indeed, we may be so little able to realize our intellectual capacities as to appear mentally defective. (Sacks, 1989, pp. 8–9)

How is the above paragraph reflected in philosophical works and, further, in contemporary art and culture? Is it true that people who are deaf and mute have intellectual deficits or lesser intellectual potential? Over two hundred years earlier, Denis Diderot in his essay *The Paradox of Acting* writes:

And how can a part be played in the same way by two different actors when, even with the clearest, the most precise, the most forceful of writers, words are no more, and never can be more, than symbols, indicating a thought, a feeling, or an idea, symbols which need action, gesture, intonation, expression, and a whole context of circumstance, to give them their full significance? (Diderot, 1751/1883, p. 5)

Let us consider how Diderot's question on gestures, expression and also intonation being an essential part of acting can be understood in the context of the contemporary theater play *Jeden gest (One Gesture)* by Wojtek Ziemilski. This performance is about communicating with the world – the hearing world and the world of the Deaf. The director says that his main field of interest is communication – the transfer (producing and processing) of knowledge, emotions, culture. He is also trying to find out what we can learn about the world from the languages of the Deaf. What in the Deaf communication experience is universal and what would be exceptional? The play is performed by the Deaf who tell their own personal stories. It can be seen and understood by both the Deaf and by hearing viewers, as sign language interpretation is provided. One of the most important scenes of the play is when Adam "tells" the story of how his lack of phonic language understanding results in everyday life functioning problems. How it prevents him from taking

a journey to visit a friend. At some point of his story we see the gestures (sign language), hear the sounds (music), see the images (on the screen behind the actor) and then suddenly first the sound and then the image disappear. The audience sees only the person signing. Telling the story. One could think that once we do not see (the image) and do not hear (the music), the “told” (with hands and body movements) story can be understood only by the Deaf. Is it really so? Does the scene become less intelligible to the hearing? No. The non-signing part of the audience also participates and follows the story.

Though the question arises: Is that because the expression of the actor is so vivid and clear? Or is it because the previous sensory experience (the reception with all/most of the senses) allowed us (through cortical responses) to produce memory, comparison, judgment and association, and therefore to “understand” the rest of the story? Another scene conclusively proves how difficult it is to express the abstract in signed language. The actors are given a sentence, randomly chosen from among several dozen examples, and are asked to translate it into sign language. One of the sentences is: *Two wrongs do not make a right* (*Dwa zła nie czynią jednego dobra*). The audience observes the process of “translation” which seems to be a struggle as the Deaf find it difficult to understand the meaning of the phrase. Two of the four characters of the play are patients with cochlear implants, who gained the ability to hear and speak, and they are the ones most involved in the translation process, explaining the meaning of the abstract sentence to the other two who clearly have trouble understanding it. The play definitely lets viewers get to know and a little better understand the distant and hermetic world of the Deaf, to see it through the eyes of the characters.

Olivier Sacks describes in detail the history of the Deaf and their social position over the ages. And, unfortunately, what Sacks says was a belief three hundred years ago still seems to be applicable. Some changes in the attitude towards the Deaf only began in the eighteenth century. Before then, for thousands of years people with congenital deafness had been treated as mentally handicapped. Laws were cruel and inhumane. The Deaf were deprived of the right to inheritance, education, marriage, or even work (Sacks, 1989).

André Aciman recounts further practical aspects of living with a deaf person. From a literary and emotional point of view his account should be read as a beautiful and touching story. His mother suffered hearing loss due to meningitis when she was just a few months old. “Her ears were healthy but meningitis had touched the part of her brain responsible for hearing” (Aciman, 2014). In those days (i.e. in the 1920s) deafness was a stigma. Deaf children would often be neglected by poor and uneducated parents. Aciman’s mother was, in a way, very lucky, since she belonged to a middle-class,

French-speaking Jewish family and her father, who was a wealthy merchant, spared no expense and effort to help his daughter. Unfortunately there was no cure. So not only did medicine not provide any suitable solutions, but the social attitude did not create a suitable environment for a deaf person to function normally either. Aciman's mother had spent the first eighteen years of her life learning how to do what could not have seemed more unnatural to her: pretend to hear. Her deafness had always "stood like an insuperable wall" between her and her husband. Because of her "limitations" they never shared the same interests, so that despite having loved each other until the very end, they misunderstood each other their whole life together (Aciman, 2014).

## Conclusion

In one of Plato's works (*Cratylus*), Socrates delivers the following comment: "If we had neither voice nor tongue, and yet wished to manifest things to one another, should we not, like those which are at present mute, endeavor to signify our meaning by the hands, head, or other parts of the body?" (Wright, 1969, p. 156). The above can be confirmed by the account of Pierre Desloges, the author of what is believed to be the first book published by a deaf person (Desloges, 1779):

The sign language we use among ourselves, being a faithful image of the objects expressed is singularly appropriate for making our ideas accurate and for extending our comprehension by getting us to form the habit of constant observation and analysis. The language is lively; it portrays sentiment, and develops the imagination. No other language is more appropriate for conveying strong and great emotions. (Lane, 1984, p. 37)

And even though sign language had been considered fragmentary, pantomimic and primitive for a long time, after learning the description and the sign language teaching methods used by de L'Épée, Condillac ceased to consider the Deaf to be "statues, living machines," unable to perform any mental activity. *Sensualism* merges the functioning of the senses and simultaneous reception of multiple sensory stimuli, which only in such combination produce intellectual potential (Abbé de Condillac, 1887).

Abbé Roch-Ambroise Sicard, an eminent eighteenth-century linguist and the director of the National Institute for the Deaf in Paris (1791), claimed that a deaf person "has no symbols for fixing and combining ideas... that there is a total communication-gap between him and other people" (Sacks, 1989, p. 15). Therefore it is possible to create a world, to develop a language and a culture with no connection to and no base in phonic language; a world, a language and a culture that are not the effect of hearing and therefore the



ability of developing speech. Nonetheless, sign language is a special and temporal expression of the sensual experience, the effect of decomposition required for the process of creating an association and understanding reality. But the culture and the world created by it are so different and separate from those known to the hearing. In Poland, standards have not been developed for teaching the Deaf the phonic language as a foreign language; as a result, the process of phonic language acquisition by the Deaf is characterized by high inefficiency. That means that the Deaf not only do not speak the phonic language but also, which may seem less obvious and hard to imagine, do not read, be it Polish, English or any other phonic alphabet (Świdziński, 2014). Hence the Deaf cannot fully participate in social life, use the entire cultural heritage of our civilization, acquire and exchange information. The above certainly does not mean that the Deaf culture based on sign language is any less valuable than the culture of the hearing. However, two things should be taken into account. Due to the crucial system differences between phonic and spatial languages, the way of expressing the world in both of these systems is radically different, so that communication between speakers of the two often becomes impossible. It does not allow the penetration of these worlds in such a way as it occurs in environments that use two or more phonic languages or distinct sign languages. An important factor is also deaf persons' inability to express abstract concepts, which are often the basis for the hearing world's functioning. That causes the borders to be determined in utterly different ways by the Deaf and the hearing.

In the light of existing social norms, I see the Deaf as a *victimized* group which meets the definition of a minority (Świdziński, 2014). This is a minority which is defective in the context of functioning according to established norms, but not as much due to the fact of having limitations as due to the fact that these limitations make it impossible to establish effective verbal communication, and so to create the borders of the world known to the hearing. The above proves that not hearing and not speaking the phonic language does create borders. The Deaf create their own world whose limits are determined by *their* language, sign language. But this other world is no less rich, vast or valuable than the hearing one. And certainly not so because it is being created with no use of phonic language and verbal communication.

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## Czy język określa granice naszego świata? Głusi poza nawiasem

*Granice naszego języka są granicami naszego świata.*  
(Ludwig Wittgenstein)

*Jeśli nie w słowach, jak organizowała swoje myśli?* – pyta współczesny amerykański pisarz André Acimana w eseju o swojej głuchej matce. Innymi słowy, można zapytać – jak organizowała swój świat – bo nawet nieświadomie wierzymy, że: *granice naszego języka są granicami naszego świata*. Biorąc za punkt wyjścia słynne powiedzenie Ludwiga Wittgensteina oraz wykorzystując dzieła Platona (*Kratylos*), Denisa Diderota (*Paradoks o aktorze*), Étienne’a Bonnota de Condillaca (*Traktat o wrażeniach zmysłowych*), Olivera Sacksa (*Zobaczyć głos*) i innych, analizuję postrzeganie granic świata przez pryzmat języka, w ujęciu interdyscyplinarnym, z pogranicza literatury porównawczej, językoznawstwa i medycyny. Czy język to tylko proteza, bez której można żyć? Czy ręce mówią dokładniej niż słowa? A może bycie głuchym to niepełnosprawność znacznie bardziej ograniczająca niż bycie niewidomym? Czy słyszenie jest naprawdę ważne, ponieważ odgrywa kluczową rolę w tworzeniu pamięci, umożliwiając porównywanie, ocenianie i tworzenie skojarzeń? Słyszenie, z medycznego punktu widzenia, jest niezbędne do wykształcenia mowy. Jak zatem niesłyszenie, a zatem niemówienie ogranicza nasz świat? Czy ogranicza?

**Słowa kluczowe:** język, mowa, język migowy, sensualizm.

### Note

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