Cueing:
Neither Tongue in Cheek
Nor Sleight of Hand

by Earl Fleetwood, M.A. and Melanie Metzger, Ph.D

It seems fascinating, to say the least, that deaf native cuers can understand a message even if cued without use of the mouth. At first, it seems that deaf people who have grown up exposed to a cued language can perform some type of magical feat, able to hurdle a seemingly impassable barrier. After all, isn't cueing simply a system for making lipreading clear? Discussions of cueing have long assumed that English is on the lips and that cues simply take away the guesswork. So, this seemingly prestidigious performance of deaf native cuers provides, to say the least, a nudge, enticing a look behind a longstanding curtain of assumptions to see wherein the real magic lives.

Language is a phenomena that most of us take for granted: we're born without knowing one; we acquire one without trying; and we use one without analysis or effort. Yet, despite the fact that knowing a language receives little conscious attention, we tend to have deeply rooted notions about its use. For example, vocabulary and pronunciation are constantly scrutinized by fellow language users. One cannot help but employ a dialect/accent, a word choice and register (e.g. casual, formal), and, in so doing, reveal something about upbringing, station in life, and sense of self. Not surprisingly, our notions about language are more rooted in how something is phrased or pronounced than in what it is that distinguishes language as an avenue of communication.

Yet, herein lies the heart of the mystery hiding behind our curtain of assumptions about language. As native *speakers* of English, we had assumed that English is a *spoken* language that also has a written representation. Experience can lead to the assumption that one's ability to speak English correlates with their knowledge of English and even reveals whether or not they are native users. Without conscious attention, one easily comes to associate the ability to speak English with English competence. However, counter to this deeply rooted notion is the example of a deaf native cuer, whose speech might not be our match, yet who uses English as a native peer. It appears that the speech of a native cuer of English is no more an indicator of English competence than is the cueing of a native speaker of English. The nature of a mystery is uncovered when we recognize that how English is expressed and what English is are not one and the same.

So, what is English – or any language – if not defined in terms of how it is expressed? English, like any language, is a system of rules and processes for manipulating meaningless segments (or bits of data). Speakers *represent* the segments via speech, cuers by way of cuem. Nevertheless, manipulation in this instance is not a function of either speech or cuem (i.e. voice or handshape) – once again, the speech of a native cuer is no more an indication of linguistic competence than is the cuem of a native speaker. Instead, manipulation is a *mental* process and the segments are mental realities – independent of expression (i.e. speech, cuem).

Knowledge of a language is, therefore, defined in terms of a mental blueprint rather than in terms of how that blueprint is represented. Native English cuers and native English speakers have internalized the same blueprint and, thus, the same language despite the fact that the former relies on hand, mouth, light, and vision to send and receive the blueprint while the latter makes use of voice, breath stream, sound, and hearing. Native cuers who don't speak and native speakers who don't cue serve as evidence that each can know the same language without having the skills of the other in communicating it. This reality is a far cry from how we tend to think about a language that we internalized without trying, and use without analysis or effort. Yet, it is the essence of the magic that wows a native speaker when a native cuer understands cuem without the mouth part. In fact, once we understand the implications of this reality, we find that native speakers are equally competent magicians in their own right.

Imagine a hearing person trying to learn spoken English when, for example, every "z" sounds like "s," every "v" sounds like "f," every "g" like "k," and every "j" like "ch." In such a condition, learning English via speech and hearing would be cumbersome if not fruitless and fleeting; some pieces of the English puzzle would be duplicates, while others would appear to be missing entirely. Yet, such is the nature of English when it is whispered. Native speakers of English understand whispered English because the speech that they are used to is missing but one component – voice. Native speakers of English can fill-in this missing

component *mentally* by referring to the blueprint of English in their heads, mentally recognizing the linguistic value of each segment (e.g. "s" vs "z") despite the fact that each segment is not represented discretely. In other words, understanding a whispered message is a process of mapping what is heard onto a language blueprint and making discrete in the mind what is not discrete to the ear. Were native speakers not so unconsciously adept at this process, they might call it magic.

Likewise, imagine a native cuer trying to learn cued English if, for example, "m," "f," and "t" look alike, when "h," "s," and "r" are indistinguishable, and when "ee" and "er" are visibly identical. It is likely that learning English via cuem and vision would not succeed given such ambiguity; some pieces of the English puzzle would be duplicates, while others would appear to be missing entirely. Yet, such is the nature of English when it is cued without use of the mouth. Native cuers of English understand cued English without the mouth because the cuem that they are used to is missing but one component – the mouth. Native cuers of English can fill-in this missing component *mentally* by referring to the blueprint of English in their heads, mentally recognizing the linguistic value of each segment (e.g. "m" vs "f") despite the fact that each segment is not represented discretely. In other words, understanding a message cued without the mouth is a process of mapping what is seen onto a language blueprint and making discrete in the mind what is not discrete to the eye. Native cuers are so unconsciously adept at this process that a native speaker is awed by what seems a prestidigious performance. (For native speakers and native cuers, the closure groupings differ while the closure task remains the same.)

Where cueing is concerned, some inaccurate yet deeply held notions have served as a curtain of misassumption and resulting misperception. For example, cuem has long been inaccurately described as a supplement to speechreading/lipreading,

- as if English lives on the tongue rather than in the head
- as if speech and, therefore, *speech*reading, is the purveyor of language
- as if a mental blueprint is more a product of the ear than of the eye
- as if the native cuer perceives the hand supplementing the mouth more than the mouth supplementing the hand
- as if handshape/hand-placement and mouthshape can be separated when defining cuem

With a bit of conscious reckoning it becomes clear that the hand is no more a supplement to the mouth of a cuer than the voice is a supplement to the tongue of a speaker; each is a requisite part of the user's ability to clearly express and receive language. In fact, when we examine the nature of *language* by pulling back our curtain of linguistic assumptions, we uncover a reality that proves many deeply held notions false and we unveil a truth which lies at the root of the native cuer's seemingly mystical powers: language is not on our hands or in our mouths. Language is the magic of the mind.