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SABINE ARNAUD

From Gesture to Sign: Sign Language Dictionaries and the Invention of a Language

Language moves, despite its rulers.

—Louis-Sébastien Mercier

Abstract

The last fifty years have seen the accelerated compilation of sign language dictionaries in many countries, but France is the only country in which early, repeated attempts were made, with nine dictionaries published in the nineteenth century. The challenges were many: creating signs, establishing a national sign language, inventing a format for a sign language dictionary, and instituting the book's authority as the reference for the language of a community. Starting with Abbé de l'Épée's late-eighteenth-century dictionary and working up to Abbé Lambert's in 1865, this article investigates some of the epistemological and formal challenges involved in this undertaking.

THE DEVELOPMENT of sign language studies over the last fifty years and the recent protections for sign language enacted by the United Nations and the European Union have had an unprecedented result: the accelerated compilation of signs in national dictionaries

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(Batterbury 2012; Pabsch and Wheatley 2012). Until a few years ago, in the case of most national sign languages no such tool had been available. In fact, several countries—including the Netherlands, which was active early in the creation of schools for deaf children¹ but which comprised several separate kingdoms with different languages and cultures—do not yet have a standardized sign language despite the existence of sign language dictionaries (Herreweghe and Vermeerbergen 2009; Koolhof and Shermer 2009; Radutzky 2001). Although this development may seem contemporary, there is in fact a substantial historical precedent: In the late eighteenth century, around the time of the development of deaf education, a number of sign language dictionaries were created, with fascinating histories and trajectories. Some of these dictionaries remained in manuscript form; others were published in limited editions—with the result that it is difficult for the historian to find a copy today. German, Spanish, and Brazilian sign language dictionaries were published in the second half of the nineteenth century (da Gama 1875; de Villabrilie 1851; Jarisch 1851), while the first American Sign Language dictionary was published only at the beginning of the twentieth century (Brown 1856; Delaporte and Shaw 2010; Long 1910). Surprisingly, although British Sign Language has little in common with American Sign Language, the first dictionary dates back only to 1992—until then there was only a booklet published in 1900, which gathered a few signs (Austin 1900; Brien 1992). The only country in which such attempts were made regularly is France, where eight dictionaries were published throughout the nineteenth century.

In France in 1635, the Académie Française was created with the responsibility of regulating spoken and written French at a time when schooling was available to very few people. This would be accomplished, in part, with the publication of a dictionary regularly reedited to incorporate new terms and variations (Kibbee 1999). Shortly after the revolution, the French state first endowed the creation of a National Institute for Deaf-Mutes, at which sign language and written French were to be the regular languages of instruction (Buton 2009; Weiner 1993). However, no equivalent commitment was made to establish an authoritative source for sign language (Bonnal-Vergès 2006; Delaporte 2005, 2007, 2012; Delaporte and Renard 2004). Despite

the fact that the teachers at the National Institute wanted to see their institution become the *école normale* (training school for teachers) of deaf pupils, only its first director, Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard, attempted to provide a sign language dictionary of reference (Sicard 1808).

The series of dictionaries that followed did not function as regular updates of Sicard's first publication; instead, they offered a selection of signs without acknowledging their evolution from the signs recorded in previous works (Bonnal 2003, 2004; Bonnal-Vergés 2012; Fischer 1991, 1996). An 1890 speech by Père Bouchet addressed to the bishop Bécél in Vannes used the image of Babel to retrospectively characterize sign language. In the speech, Bouchet recounts stories of witnessing the use of totally different signs in Lille, Paris, Lyon, and Orléans (Bonnal-Vergès 2006, 10). In fact, throughout the nineteenth century, teachers repeatedly complained about the use of different signs in classes at the Parisian National Institute. Since one of the trades usually taught in institutes for deaf pupils—one for which the pupils were famous—was printing itself, the absence of such dictionaries in the archives indicates that the conception of a sign language dictionary has been a continual problem. But for a few exceptions, the story of nineteenth-century French sign language dictionaries itself appears as a long series of uncompleted, postponed, and/or failed attempts. Yet, even the failures and incompletions are themselves intriguing, insofar as they illuminate the various challenges raised by the singularity of sign language.

The challenges, in fact, were many: creating signs, establishing a national sign language, inventing a format for a sign language dictionary, and instituting the book's authority as the reference for the language of a community or, according to the terms used at the time, a nation. In an era in which semiology and linguistics did not yet exist, creating a sign language dictionary meant reflecting upon the role of signs in spoken discourses as much as in sign language, as well as examining how sign language specifically functioned. Did a sign in sign language stand for a word in spoken language on a one-to-one basis? Should a sign be fixed? How should it be formalized on paper? Sign language dictionaries had to deal at once with epistemological, formal, linguistic, and pedagogical dimensions and could not lean

much on spoken language dictionaries for support. These sign language dictionaries opened a radically new space for circulating and appropriating knowledge.

Framing the need for a sign language dictionary, lexicographers struggled with the role of sign language, the diversity of types of sign languages, and the scope of signs. Some lexicographers, in their prefaces, addressed the epistemological dimensions involved in such an undertaking, questioning in turn the intended audience as well as the creation, representation, stabilization, and standardization of signs. Others simply created new dictionaries without theorizing the changes, leaving it to users to judge the difference.

Starting with Abbé de l'Épée's dictionary, created in the late eighteenth century, and working up to Abbé Lambert's in 1865, this article will investigate how these dictionaries developed a relationship to physical signs as a language, as well as the paradoxes they entailed. It will first retrace the fates of the eight French Sign Language dictionaries published in the nineteenth century, then focus on some of the epistemological challenges raised by Sicard, before finally examining how two teachers at the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes—one hearing and one deaf, Joséphine Brouland and Pierre Pélissier—dealt with the formal hurdles of organizing a lexicon of signs.

Isolated Experiments with an Uncertain Fate

Fully in line with the development of spoken/written French dictionaries during the Enlightenment, the first two sign language dictionaries were assembled in the late eighteenth century by Abbé de l'Épée and Abbé Ferrand, teachers of deaf pupils in Paris and in Chartres, with 4,450 and 4,087 entries, respectively (Bonnal-Vergès 2008). Abbé de l'Épée and Abbé Ferrand compiled the signs long after they had invented them, which meant both men were far from regarding the dictionary as a tool instrumental to the conception and teaching of signs. Both Abbé de l'Épée and Abbé Ferrand became convinced of the necessity for a dictionary only later, probably when the sudden need arose to pass on their knowledge—as their pursuit of teaching was compromised by age and by the French Revolution, respectively—to the teachers who would follow in their wake. J. A. A. Rattel published the dictionaries a century later, accomplish-

ing the historical step of bringing the first sign language dictionary manuscripts to light. When Rattel published the dictionaries, he was a retired physician of the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes, and it is difficult to see in his actions anything other than a political act against the oralist turn the school had taken in which, in the wake of the 1880 Milan Congress, all teaching of signs had been given up (Baynton 1996; Quartararo 2008).

Abbé de l'Épée was long reluctant to put together a dictionary. Calling himself a “living dictionary” (de l'Épée 1784, 102), he conceived of himself as a human memory vault in which deaf pupils could place the signs they were using to communicate. He first claimed that signs could only be passed on by what he called a “tradition” (de l'Épée 1776, 177–78), that is, by direct transmission within a community of signers. For someone who published four works on pedagogy for deaf people (de l'Épée 1772, 1774) and who also regularly arranged occasions for his work to become known (including calling upon the Academy in Zurich to settle his polemics with Samuel Heinicke, the German teacher of deaf pupils [Alard 1880], and invitations to other teachers to come and train with him), this meant that de l'Épée not only did not see the need for a dictionary but also did not consider the passing on of specific signs a priority. His priority, instead, was to convey the importance of teaching *with* signs so that deaf pupils could fully understand the meaning of written words. In fact, de l'Épée's dictionary did not provide descriptions for most signs but, rather, explications of terms much like any dictionary would (Fischer 1999, 2014; Rée 1999). Very few of the entries include the description of the corresponding signs (Sicard 1808, xxxix, 3). Sicard recounts that de l'Épée worked on his dictionary in the summer of 1785 and that instead of getting the help of a deaf person, he did it with the help of one of his hearing assistants, M. Muller. Even though de l'Épée intended for his work to also be useful to teachers from other countries, the dictionary consists of rephrasing French definitions in a simplified manner, which leaves the reader uncertain of its usefulness. De l'Épée appears to have seen the function of his dictionary as being to provide simplified definitions that were easy to grasp.

Rattel published not only de l'Épée's dictionary, but also some of the letters Rattel found about de l'Épée's attempts to publish his

dictionary. Through these letters, one discovers that de l'Épée first approached the French government in August 1787 to obtain financial support to publish his dictionary, explaining in a letter that he was unable to pay for the printing as he himself had been in charge of the scholarship of several deaf children for fourteen years. Part of the mythology around de l'Épée says that he died in December 1789 during a winter in which he did not heat his home in order to have enough money to feed his deaf pupils. According to Maryse Bézagu-Deluy's biography, however, de l'Épée was not limited financially in any such way (Bézagu-Deluy 1990). Whether or not this printing expense was too much for his means, de l'Épée most probably saw in the request an opportunity to attract the attention of the government to the cause of deaf pupils and to his work as a schoolmaster. His mentioning the fourteen French and foreign teachers he had trained, for whom his dictionary was intended, sounds like a reminder both of the influence he had gained and of the legacy he would leave for governments to pursue his task. This was a point at which it was particularly urgent for de l'Épée to obtain the government's commitment to the cause of deaf pupils, so that a school would be founded to continue his work after his death. It was also a means of positioning his dictionary in a more authoritative way—at the heart of deaf education—after he had fought for so long to establish his pedagogical method. When Jacques Necker was named first finance minister in late August 1788, de l'Épée probably saw a new opportunity to obtain support from the government since, during his first government post as general director of the royal treasury and financial advisor, Necker had already shown his concern for the less fortunate by creating a commission for hospitals, another for prison reforms, and a third to build a hospital with state funding. Necker wrote to de l'Épée in February 1789 to tell him he had recommended de l'Épée's cause to Clause-Henry Feydeau de Marville, who was the director of finances. After de l'Épée wrote to Feydeau three days later, he learned that any additional expenses would burden the state. Feydeau advised him to instead ask the archbishop of Paris because the state had already granted de l'Épée funds to install his school in a new building. Yet de l'Épée learned through his correspondence with the Archbishop that the funds were not sufficient for even the building itself, and the manuscript was left aside.

Abbé Ferrand's dictionary, in contrast to de l'Épée's, promoted a concept of language as expression via gesture. The radicalness of Ferrand's approach was to redefine each lemma, whether it described an action or a thought, in terms of gestures. He understood each word as a movement of specific parts of the body, expressing the idea involved with a metonymy or a metaphor in motion. As such, language could be understood as that which names movements of all kinds into words, and sign language becomes a natural means of expression. Opening the dictionary, the reader finds, for example, at the letter D: "décider, décime, décisif, déclarer" (to decide, tenth, decisive, to declare). A translation of their definitions will give the reader an idea of the shift promoted by Ferrand's dictionary:

TO DECIDE: D manual sign, to express the reasons that one is examining, yes or no sign, but one or the other with a resolute expression.—Determining first sign, doubt; second sign, yes or no, terminal sign, or propositional sign, firm sign cutting with the side of the hand in front of the self at a certain distance.

TENTH: sign to count up to ten, sign to take, sign to count again and take the tenth part.

DECISIVE: sign for good or bad, sign of doubt, sign of judgment, sign for always.

TO DECLARE: propositional sign, have the index finger emerge from the middle of the chest and bring it to the mouth as if to make it come out of it, then move it in front of the eyes, the fingers of the right hand partially open.—To manifest. Sign to show that something that cannot be seen is hidden, sign of discovering it, sign for "see" in the imperative form.

Such definitions led the hearing person, accustomed to thinking in words, toward rethinking concepts of language in the modality offered by gestures and mimes. Expression occurred in relation to space; in the movement between distance and closeness; in the placement and movement of body parts; in the contrast between movement and rest; and in the effects of slowness and speed. All these could be mobilized to distinguish signs from each other and invest them with meaning.

Bonnal-Vergès has dated the compilation of Ferrand's dictionary to the end of the 1780s—long after Ferrand's nomination as the head of the school for deaf-mutes in the late 1770s (Bonnal-Vergès 2008, xxv). Ferrand probably left his dictionary to the municipal library in

Chartres during the French Revolution, when he had to abandon the school in order to emigrate. Bonnal-Vergès also suggests that this dictionary might actually have been compiled by Sister Marie Montangé, who taught in Ferrand's school after he departed.

These first two dictionaries were not published until the late nineteenth century and are unlikely to have circulated during the time of active use and reflections on signs. Sicard presented de l'Épée's dictionary as an early draft that had found its real development in Sicard's own dictionary, and Sicard's signs are acknowledged by his followers as the methodical signs of reference. The lack of any reference to Ferrand's dictionary in nineteenth-century publications—during a time when signers themselves did not learn sign from a dictionary, but by signing—indicates that its existence was ignored. The publication of the two dictionaries during the height of the oralist period—when speech had become the priority and, for many teachers, the only language used—meant that these dictionaries did not serve as pedagogical tools but, rather, were seen as relics of a previous era's means of circulating knowledge among deaf people (de l'Épée 1896; Ferrand 1897).

While the work of the two first lexicographers was quickly forgotten, that of the third, Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard, benefited from unparalleled markers of legitimacy in his enterprise. Sicard was the first director of the National Institute of Deaf-Mutes—created in 1792 during the French Revolution—a professor in the first temporary *Ecole Normale*, and a member of the Institut de France from 1795 and of the Académie Française from 1803 (Kennedy 2015). He leveraged the credit his positions gave him to take on the task of writing his dictionary alone, with a mere acknowledgment that he was using the notes of Laurine Duler, Cramer de Clauspruch of Cologne, and Abbé Nogues of Barcelona, all of whom attended his lessons in order to train to teach in their home countries (including their names was also a way for him to demonstrate his international renown). Although Sicard asked for advice and suggestions in the preface to his work, he also made clear that he would be the one to pursue the task of enhancing the dictionary in hypothetical future editions. The complexity and length of Sicard's signs were such that users tended to truncate them, which led in everyday practice to shorter versions of these signs, even if the explanations were still grounded in the dictionary. This

process of simplification only accelerated after Sicard's death in 1822. Baron de Gérando, who was part of the commission of teachers at the National Institute, included a list of these shorter descriptions in his two-volume work *The Education of Deaf-Mutes* and a revised Sunday prayer described exclusively through movements (de Gérando 1827). The brief selection of lemmas effectively makes it a glossary limited to the most common signs. In an 1850 article on education, Edouard Morel, professor of the advanced class in the Parisian National Institute, admitted that a real sign language dictionary was still to be compiled (Morel 1850).

Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, ordinary schools saw the spread of French dictionaries, with the successive publications of *Lexicologie des écoles* (1849) and the *Nouveau Dictionnaire de la langue française* by Pierre Larousse (1856). These small-format dictionaries were aimed at children who were not studying Latin, whose native tongue was dialect, and who spoke French as a second language (Pruvost 2015).

At this point, the publication of sign language dictionaries also soared and was not monopolized by teachers. In 1850 Alexandre-Louis-Paul Blanchet, a doctor at the National Institute in Paris, published a dictionary intended to facilitate communication between physicians and patients (Blanchet 1850). Eager to provide a helpful document for doctors' everyday practice, Blanchet ignored questions concerning the representation of sign language; instead, similar to Ferrand's dictionary, with which Blanchet is unlikely to have been familiar, Blanchet's dictionary described with words the movements that compose the signs, leaving out definitions. His dictionary is said to have in large part inspired the first Spanish sign language dictionary; however, because Blanchet's other publications constantly defied teachers' authority, it is improbable that anyone at the National Institute used his dictionary, which meant it did not have a wide circulation in France (Arnaud 2015).

In 1855, Blanchet launched a contest through his Société centrale d'éducation et d'assistance pour les sourds-muets (Central Society of Education and Assistance for Deaf-Mutes) to "indicate in an essay the best method of giving primary school teachers, or any other persons, the means to begin educating deaf-mute people." The contest attracted eighteen submissions (Volquin 1856a, 14–15) and brought with it a

major change in the question of who could lay claim to the authority of creating a sign language dictionary because, in addition to the first prize, a gold medal was also awarded to deaf finalist Pierre Pélessier and a silver medal to Joséphine Brouland. This success led each teacher at the (by now) Imperial Institute to finalize their work; each published a dictionary in a totally new format, relying on drawings (Brouland 1855; Pélessier 1856; Puybonnieux 1856, 114–115). For Pélessier’s dictionary, Léopold Levert drew the figures and three engravers—Bisson et Cottard, Dumont, and Marais—provided a share of the tables (figure 1). For Brouland’s table, the engraver remains unknown. Shortly

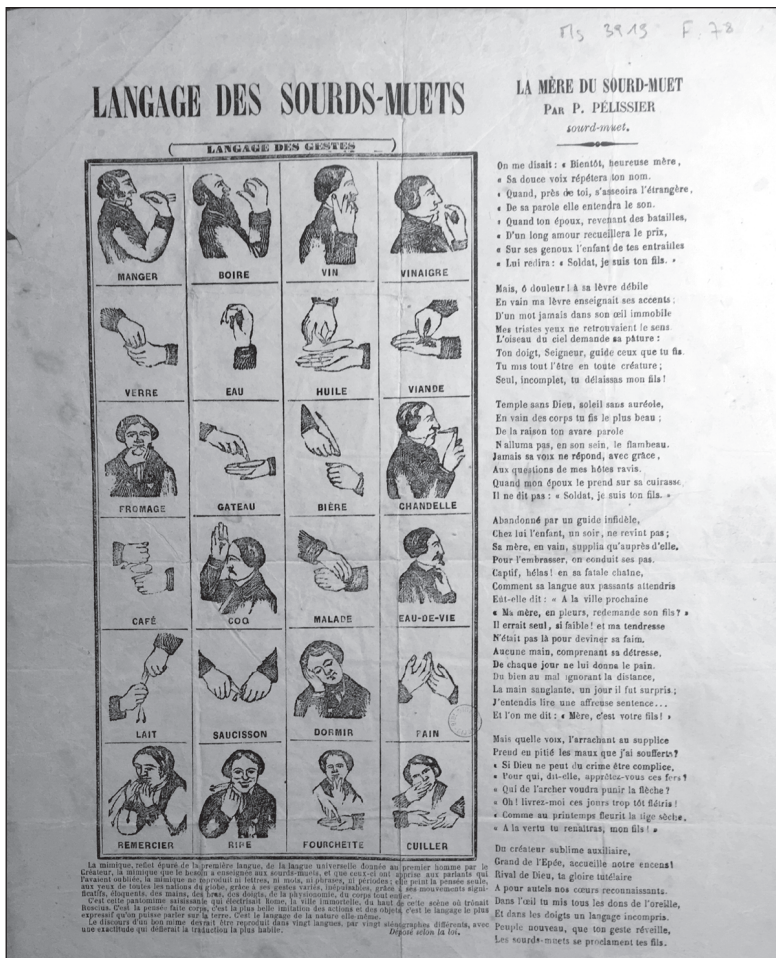


FIGURE 1. Pélessier, Single sheet, undated. Bibliothèque Municipale de Dijon.



FIGURE 2. Pélissier, Single sheet, detail. Bibliothèque Municipale de Dijon.

after Brouland's dictionary was published, the rivalry between the two authors became clear: Pélissier wrote a letter to the editor of the journal *L'Impartial* demanding that it clarify matters (Pélissier 1856, 116–17; Volquin 1856b, 117–18). While Brouland might have been the first to publish a dictionary, Pélissier wrote, *he* had been the first to undertake the task of creating one, a number of years earlier. Pélissier even mentioned that he and Brouland had both studied Jarisch's German dictionary, which was owned by the library of their institution (Fischer 2014).

Pélissier's dictionary was fully reproduced by Flausino José da Costa Gama, who had sojourned in Paris as a student before returning to Brazil to teach sign language (Sofiato and Reily 2012). Pélissier also circulated some signs on a separate one-page publication including one of his poems (figures 1, 2). Pélissier next undertook the preparation of 480 “Mimo-Mnemonic” cards for the study of languages, working with Augustin Grosselin, a former stenographer of the legislative assembly who later devoted his energies to the invention of reading, articulating, and spelling methods. While it is unclear whether the cards were ever published, in 1857 their work gained the support of Jean-Jacques Valade-Gabel, inspector of schools for deaf pupils, whose authoritative judgment was feared throughout the institutes (Valade-Gabel 1894, 238–41). He viewed the cards as an indispensable tool for both pupils and their teachers and believed it would also facilitate artists' and philosophers' appreciation of the resources and scope of sign language.

In 1868, a year before his death, François Laveau, a priest who ran a school for deaf children in Orléans, published a dictionary of signs called *Catéchisme des sourds-muets* (Catechism for Deaf-Mutes) that also replaced all definitions with drawings and short descriptions of the gestures (Laveau 1868). Laveau published his work as a testament for his followers and possibly also to defend his approach, as four years earlier his use of signs was the subject of a critical report by philosopher Adolphe Frank, who had been sent, along with other members of the Institut de France, to evaluate his methods, among others. Such criticism could only counter the spread of his signs beyond his own school, despite the publication of his dictionary (Franck 1861).

Sixty years after Sicard, Abbé Louis-Marie Lambert, chaplain of the Imperial Institution, set out to compile a comprehensive collec-

tion of signs that would address the largest possible audience. *Le Language de la physionomie & du geste mis à la portée de tous* (Physiognomy and Gesture Language for Everyone) was aimed at clergy members, physicians, and teachers, as well as orators (Lambert 1865). This work consisted of several parts, including an introduction by the archbishop of Paris as well as the reproduction of a letter by Victor Duruy in which the Ministry of Public Instruction requested advice from rectors concerning the education of deaf pupils, so that education could also be offered to deaf pupils in regular primary schools. Lambert also included a series of testimonials by priests stating that using this dictionary aided them in their teaching. It was the first time since Sicard that a dictionary was published as a national and political tool and meant for the use of teachers beyond those in institutions for deaf pupils. In fact, the dictionary was also aimed at teachers from primary school institutions who might welcome children in their classrooms after new administrative directives (Quartararo 1995, 2008). Could this be the reason why Lambert's dictionary advocated all modes of communication (sign, dactylogy, speech, and writing) and ended with a series of letters on articulation addressed to the mother of a deaf child?

As if to prove the urgent need for such a dictionary, Lambert added statistics about the number of deaf people per French *département*, as well as statements about the causes of deafness and accounts of pedagogical methods for teaching illiterate deaf people outside special institutions, as well as so-called “backward” children. The dictionary itself was divided into four parts: a dactylogical table; 500 drawings of signs—some to be used in religious practice, some in daily intercourse, organized by themes; and two lists of words (figures 3–6). The first list included all simple signs, which Lambert described as “more or less natural” (Lambert 1868, 68). The second list focused on complex signs, assembling the description of signs for 30 lemmas meant to stand for 30,000 words, grouping synonyms under a single lemmas, which led Lambert to adjudge it “complete.” He explained that signs are inspired by the gestures people make while speaking, and the entries offer detailed descriptions of the movements to be performed. Inviting the reader to consider his or her thoughts as pictures, he named disposition, localization, and action as the three main criteria for the correct conception of sign language and claimed

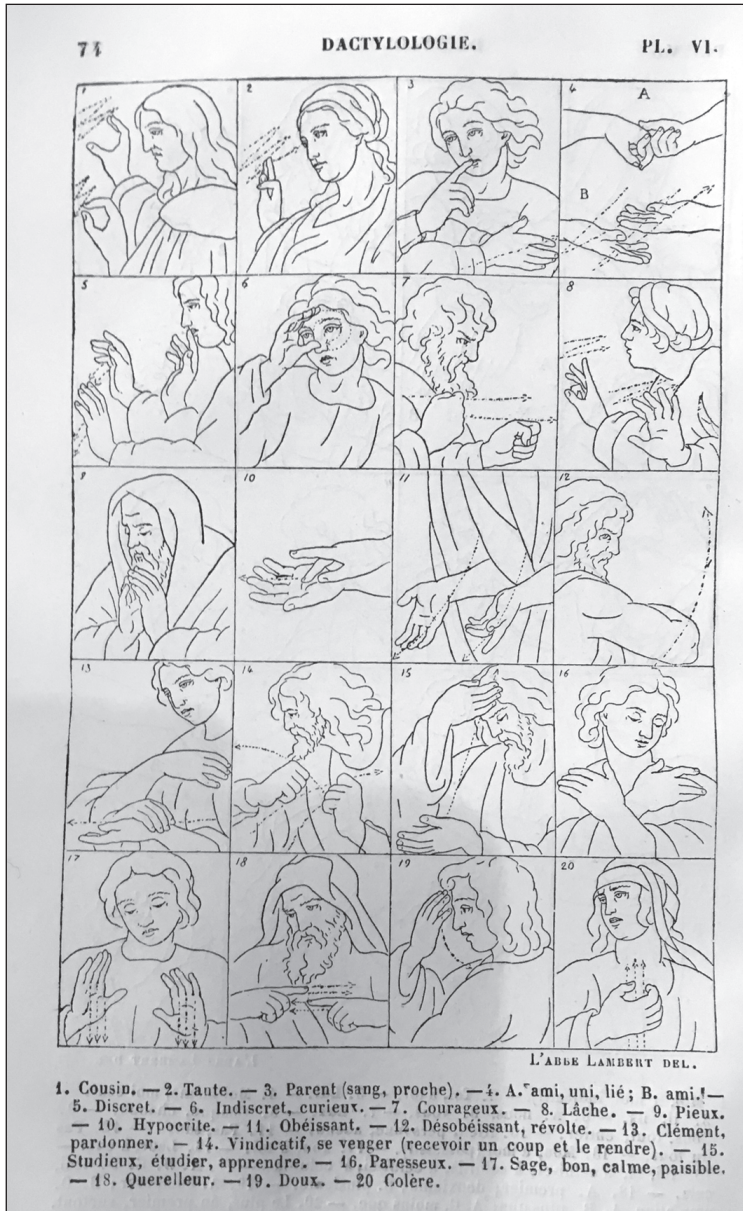


FIGURE 3. Lambert, Louis-Marie. 1865. *Le Language de la physionomie & du geste mis à la portée de tous*. Paris: Jacques Lecoffre, p. 74. BIU Santé.

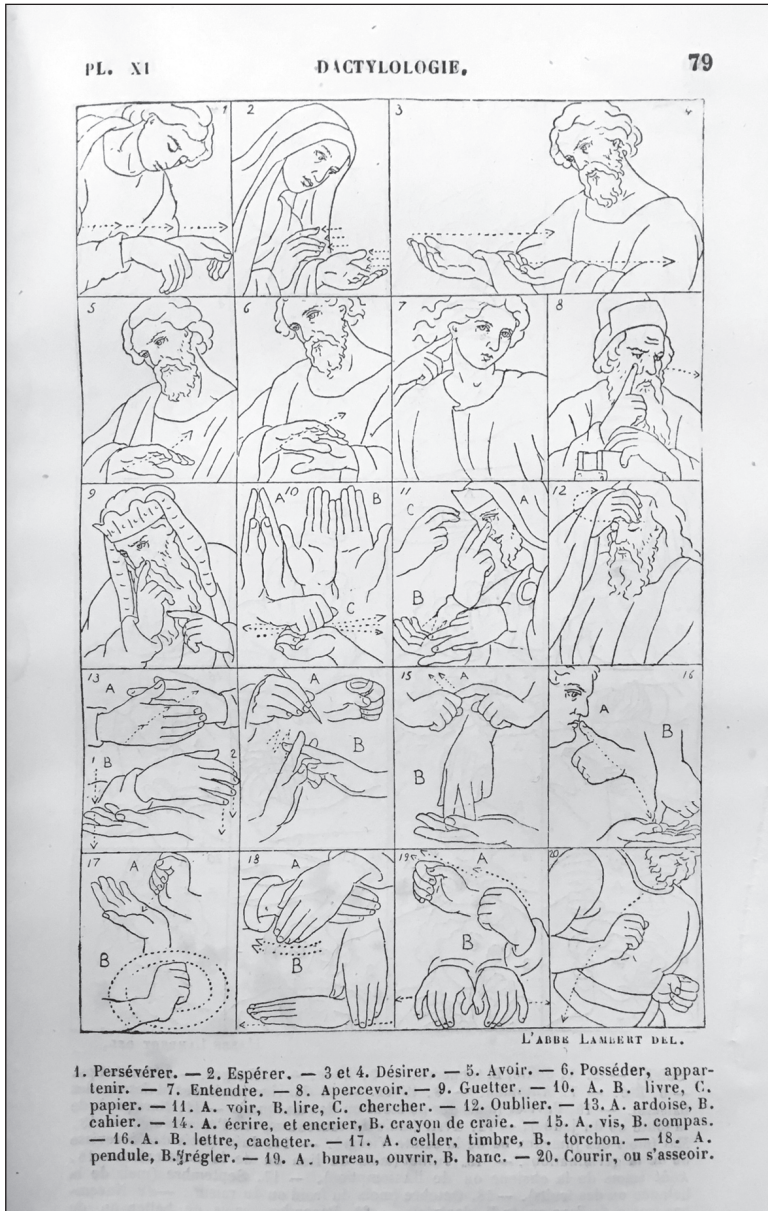


FIGURE 4. Lambert, Louis-Marie. 1865. *Le Language de la physionomie & du geste mis à la portée de tous*. Paris: Jacques Lecoffre, p. 79. BIU Santé.

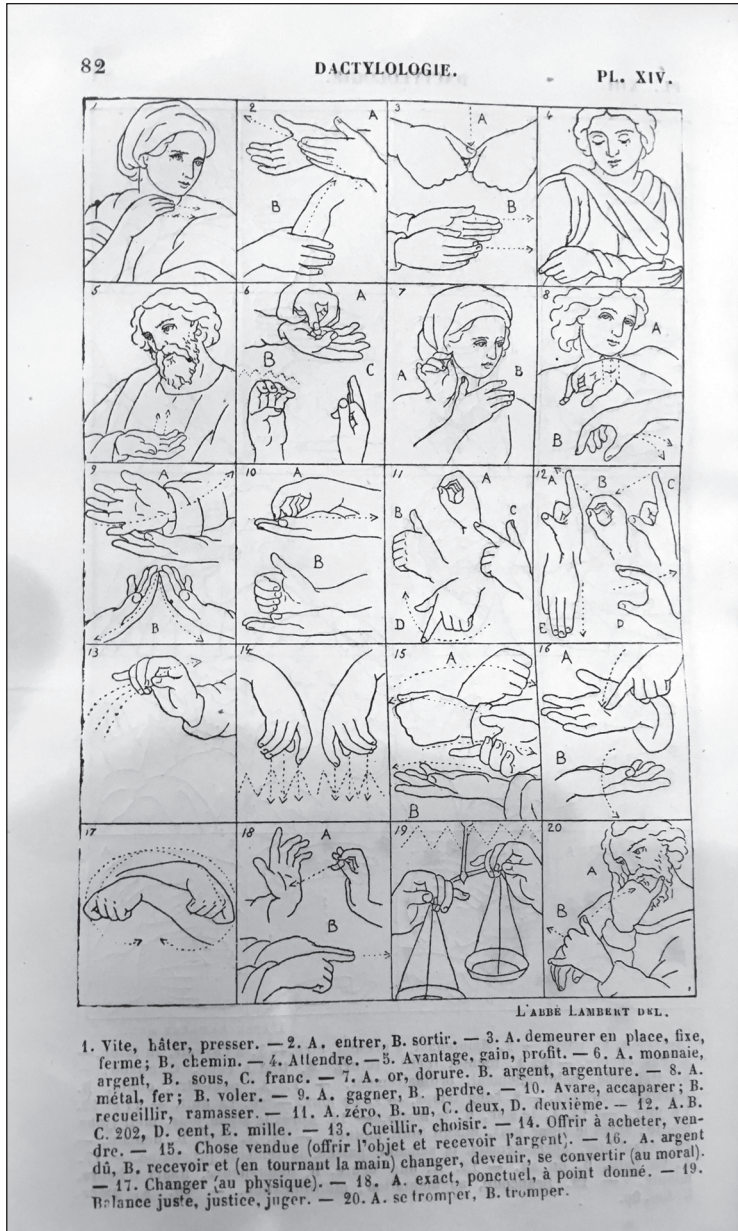


FIGURE 5. Lambert, Louis-Marie. 1865. *Le Langage de la physionomie & du geste mis à la portée de tous*. Paris: Jacques Lecoffre, p. 82. BIU Santé.

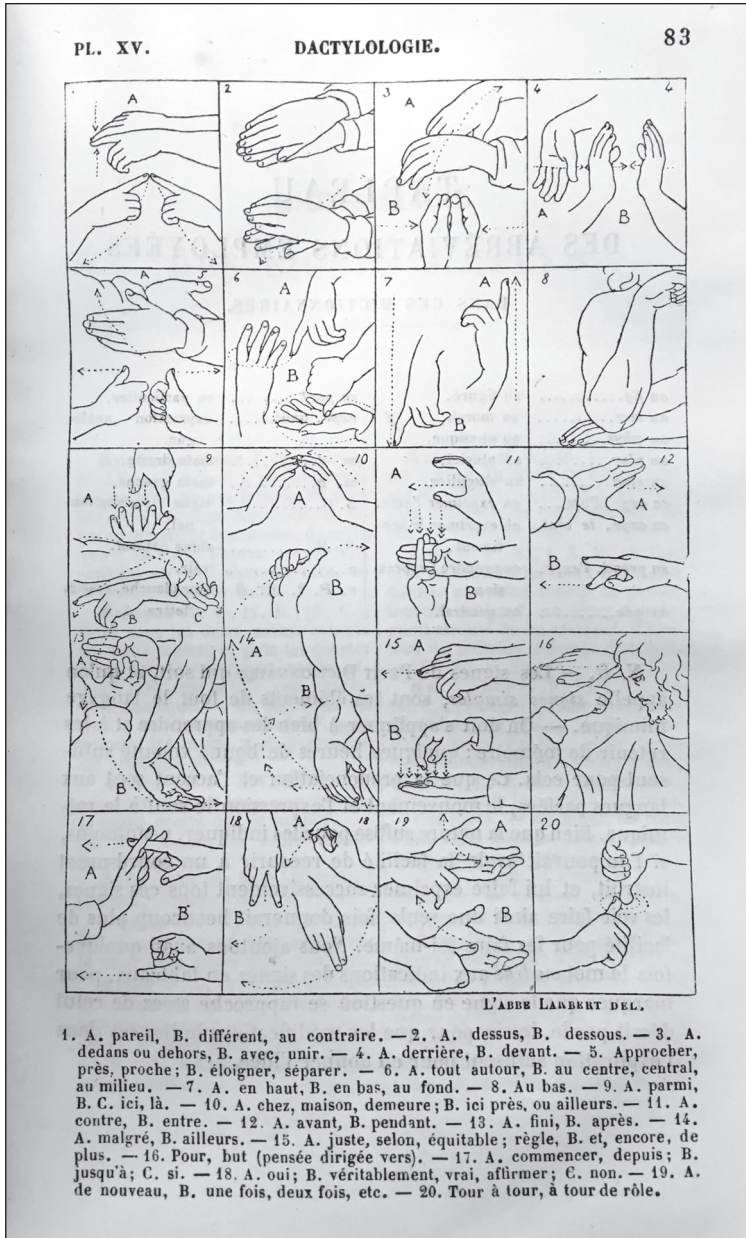


FIGURE 6. Lambert, Louis-Marie. 1865. *Le Language de la physionomie & du geste mis à la portée de tous*. Paris: Jacques Lecoffre, p. 83. BIU Santé.

that “sign language need only be awakened in us to be understood and spoken” (Lambert 1868, 44). While the extensive reach of his dictionary signaled its important role in education and in unifying signs nationally, Lambert’s claims concerning the dictionary’s scope undercut any authoritative view. He presented the dictionary “more as a stimulant and an appeal to nature than a descriptive pedagogy of the positions of arms and hands” (Lambert 1868, 67), which figured its role as not so much aiding in selecting the right signs, but rather serving as a compilation meant to inspire communication and the further creation of signs.

The pedagogical structure of this work seemed to ensure that it would rapidly become an indispensable reference. But while time alone might have encouraged this, the moment of its publication worked against it. Léon Vaisse was director of the National Institute from 1866 and gave priority to the teaching of speech. The arrival of Martin Etcheverry in 1873 reestablished the priority of signs, but he was asked to retire in 1880 and was replaced by the physician Louis-Ernest Peyron, who implemented the exclusive teaching of speech in accordance with Ministry of the Interior directives (Denis 1886). Teachers relinquished the use of signs with all new pupils, and from then on, sign language dictionaries did not have much of a chance.

Several dictionaries that were completed remained unpublished, which allows us to imagine a whole series of unpublished dictionaries intended for teachers at religious institutions for deaf people in the nineteenth century still to be discovered in the archives of institutes. Between 1853 and 1854, the Frères Saint Gabriel tasked themselves with the goal of establishing identical signs throughout France, but they never published the results (Delaporte 2008). The Frères Saint Gabriel, who were in charge of fifteen schools for deaf pupils, collected signs by asking a number of teachers to start making lists of their signs and to elaborate methods for writing them down. With this, they put together a dictionary comprising 1,200 entries, focusing also on the description of signs without illustrations. (Though it was not published at the time, it has since been rediscovered and was finally published [Bonnal-Vergès 2006a]) Some of the descriptions were conceived following the model of acrony, used to teach reading: the

signer would sign the first letter of the word using the dactylological alphabet, then make a sign related to the word's meaning (Arnaud 2019). Signs for words were also often composed of signs for other words—a sign and its negation or a sign and a qualification. For example, “insensitive” is expressed using both the sign for the heart and the sign for “hard.” While the collective nature of this enterprise gave it broader scope, the Frères Saint Gabriel themselves ended up hampering it shortly after its inception, in 1854, by turning to other teaching methods and advocating the teaching of speech.

Abbé Jamet, who opened a school in Normandy, created his own dictionary of sign language. Two manuscript copies are housed in the Church of the Bon Sauveur, of which he was a patron; one is in Caen and the other in Albi, attesting to the attempt to spread the same teaching method and signs throughout the congregation. Jamet's dictionary in Caen is still in the state of a draft with alterations and deletions (Jamet n.d.).² Much like de l'Épée's dictionary, it was compiled by copying from a regular dictionary as attested by the number of lemmas that are then crossed out as if judged unnecessary after being systematically copied, and it focused mostly on meaning (figures 7–8). Another dictionary, this one by Abbé Lelièvre (who was chaplain from 1878 and later confessor), can also be found in the Caen congregation (Lelièvre n.d.). This dictionary presents a fully new version, focusing on the signs instead of their meaning (figures 9–10). It starts with a list of signs for prefixes and endings, followed by a complete dictionary. This volume also contains a method for the teaching of speech. The fact that Lelièvre has made a clean copy of his notes supports the claim that both teaching methods were used in those years and were meant to be used in coming years, because one can surmise the speaking methods would have been put in a different volume if they were to be used exclusively. In 1856, the printing company Paul Dupont announced a forthcoming dictionary of 20,000 figures drawn by Metivier, indicating that excerpts had been shown at the Universal Exhibition of 1855 in Paris. Subscriptions were requested, and the timeframe for payment was generous.³ However, the dictionary was never published, nor was the manuscript ever found. Père Bouchet, after discovering the diversity of signs used in various

afin de.	me . a. afin . de . . . ou que.
affaiblir	à . . . faiblir
affaiblir	lever le pied droit & l'avancer au l'écart en avant.
affranchir	exclure . rompre les liens des pieds & des mains.
afreux	beau . non . détestable . adj . au x.
afriander	
afrou	affronter . v. honte . abs.
afronter	à . . . frons . air téméraire & montrant une chose qui ne va pas . air de fureur . Les présenter comme bon . avec un air de confiance.
afubler	Les deux mains ouvertes et rapprochées l'une de l'autre seigne le mouvement qui indique l'action de jeter un manteau sur les épaules.
agacer	action de pincer de tous côtés en riant
âge	La main s'élève de terre par bond & peu à peu . subst.
agé.	âge . adj.
agacer	
agacer.	
agacouillat	action de se mettre à grogner.
agacouillat	
agere	agit . subst.
aggraver	à . . . grave . mode indéfini.
aggraver	
aggravant	aggraver . participe présent.
agile	on lève vivement un pied . Les deux mains font le mouvement d'une personne qui saute . La figure s'élève . adj.
agilement	agile . adv.
agilité. C.	id. Subst. abs.
axiot	
agistage	
agiter	
agitant	
agir	encourir la deux main à quelque distance l'une de l'autre en se voyant

FIGURE 8. Dictionnaire de Signes, ms. Undated. Bretteville sur Odon, Communauté du Bon sauveur.

Circon.	} L'index droit trace un cercle autour du poing gauche, en appuyant le bout dessus.	39
Circum.		
Co, col,	} La main droite, formant la lettre C, se place, par le bout des doigts, contre la poitrine.	
com, cov.		
Contra,	} Même signe des deux mains.	
Contre.		
Di, dif, dis.	La main droite, formant la lettre D, s'élève devant le front, la paume en avant, comme pour indiquer vaguement un lieu.	
E, ef, ex.	La main droite, formant la lettre E, se porte à droite.	
Em, en.	L'index et le long doigt de la main droite, unis et seuls ouverts, entre l'index et le pouce de la main gauche fermée comme pour la lettre O.	
Il, im, in, iv.	Le petit doigt de la main droite, seul ouvert comme pour la lettre I, vient se poser à angle droit sur le milieu de l'index de la main gauche ouverte, la paume en bas.	
Inler.	Placez la main droite ouverte, la paume en-dessus, entre l'index et le long doigt de la main gauche ouverte.	
Intrio.	Le petit doigt de la main droite, seul ouvert, s'introduit entre l'index et le pouce de la main gauche fermée comme pour la lettre O.	
Mi.	La main gauche étant ouverte, le petit doigt en bas,	

FIGURE 9. Abbé Lelièvre, *Dictionnaire de Signes*, ms. Undated. Bretteville sur Odon, Communauté du Bon sauveur.

A.		43
Abaissement.	A. La main droite formant la lettre D, placée à la hauteur de la tête, la paume en bas, s'abaisse vers la terre (substantif en ment, Page 42).	
Abaisser.	vrem (signe de l'Infinitif, Page 18).	
Abandon.	Abandonner (subs.)	
Abandonnement.	id (subs. en ment).	
Abandonner.	Montrer quelqu'un du doigt; lui tourner le dos en le repoussant.	
Abattage.	Simule l'action de couper plusieurs arbres; ou, comme ci-dessous, Abatte (subs. masc.)	
Abattement.	A. Les deux bras s'élèvent à la hauteur de la tête et retombent mollement vers la terre (air découragé). Subs. en ment.	
Abatte.	(sens propre.) A. Les deux mains formant la lettre D, portées à droite et élevées à la hauteur de la tête, retombent vivement l'une sur l'autre du côté gauche.	
Abatte (s').	(sens figuré.) Voyez ci-dessus, Abattement (Infinitif).	
Abbé.	Figurer une croix avec l'index gauche et bénir avec la main droite.	
Abbesse.	Même signe plus celui du Féminin.	
Abdication.	Abdiquer (subs. en ion, Page 42).	

FIGURE 10. Abbé Lelièvre, *Dictionnaire de Signes*, ms. Undated. Bretteville sur Odon, Communauté du Bon sauveur.

institutions, undertook to put together a dictionary of 11,120 words with the help of the Sœurs de la Sagesse (an order of nuns) to remedy the situation (Bonnal-Vergès 2006a, 10). The move to oralism left this initiative dangling, and Bouchet himself put it aside.

The legacy of all these dictionaries remains limited. Yet a closer examination shows that the more or less temporary priority given to speech in 1880 does not fully account for the dictionaries' lack of influence; nor do professional rivalries between colleagues and institutions. The epistemological and formal difficulties involved in the constitution of a sign language dictionary, and the appropriation of signs through such a format, offered challenges of their own.

An Epistemological Challenge

When Sicard began putting together his dictionary, it was intended to form part of a series of publications that would develop a method of instruction establishing a canonical model for the education of deaf pupils and that would include moral dialogues, courses of instruction, and works on grammar (Sicard 1797, 1803, 1806, 1808a, 1808b, 1814). In Sicard's introduction to his *Théorie des signes pour l'instruction des sourds-muets* (Theory of Signs for the Instruction of Deaf-Mute People), he claims that the dictionary's role is to establish the conventional status of signs; he gives sign language legitimacy by opposing his signs to natural signs (Sicard 1808b). "Natural sign" was the term given to signs that could be easily deciphered by their immediate context; they were often compared to signs used by earlier ages of humanity and to the language of so-called "savages" in the "New World" (Fischer 1993, 2002). The signs Sicard promoted implied, instead, a system of communication based on conventions that emulated written French.

Sicard dedicated his dictionary to Emperor Napoléon, announcing it as a work meant "to lay the foundation for the language of this new population" (Sicard 1808b)—thereby implying sign language would turn deaf people into "archetypal new men" (Rosenfeld 2006, 28; see also Rosenfeld 2001). With this gesture, Sicard, in a sense, "created" them as a population with a body of knowledge of its own that could be shared and translated. Deaf people were thus defined by their use of a specific language, and the dictionary's role was to lay the

groundwork for it, record it, establish it, and stabilize it. The dictionary was thus the foremost of all books, a necessary step to bringing order to society, above even the law (contemporaneously, Napoleon was writing the Napoleonic Code).

Following Sicard's ambitious words, in his preface he declares himself dissatisfied with his own work; any criticism it receives, he states, cannot match his own. He explains how the lack of descriptions of signs in Abbé de l'Épée's dictionary had left Sicard the task of building a dictionary from scratch, and he unfolds for the reader the difficulties he faced because it was neither possible nor necessary to invent all of the signs at once (Ree 1999, 188–192). He asks: "How can one teach signs that still lack ideas? How can one translate words with signs, when the words are not understood and the signs that would be their translation have not yet been invented?" (Sicard 1808b, lii) These were not rhetorical questions. Sicard was putting his finger on the very paradoxes of creating a sign language dictionary. For a sign to be necessary, Sicard insisted, the idea behind it had to already be in circulation. But how could these ideas be in circulation without the signs to express them? How to create the need for a vast vocabulary among users who do not know what a word is, or how it is used? And last, but not least, how to standardize an ongoing creation?

Sicard began by setting forth the legitimate method of inventing signs. He grounded sign language in the intercourse between teacher and pupil and insisted:

It is not your role, impatient teachers, to render all the diverse states of a soul that cannot call on the organ of the voice for help. One has to have a virgin physiognomy, whose eloquent features have never been made useless by speech. [...] your task is to give birth to the circumstances in which the ideas to which you wish to apply written signs are produced. (Sicard 1808b, 10)

Writing with a Rousseauist bent, Sicard insisted that teachers not provide pupils with signs but, rather, excite their need for new ideas, which would lead them to create new signs themselves. When stimulated and inspired by their teachers, he believed, pupils would find the right signs to express their thoughts on their own (Rousseau 1762). The process was always to go from the idea to the word to the sign.

Therein lay another difficulty: the almost paradoxical roles of pedagogy and of the dictionary, as Sicard attempted to bridge the natural and the conventional qualities of signs, both of which he considered necessary. If Sicard wrote as though each pupil had to reinvent these conventional signs anew, he did not, for all that, adopt the platonic view according to which knowledge is accessible to all for having been forgotten (Plato, 84b–85d). This begs the question: Was the idea that all of the pupils would arrive at the same signs as a result of the teacher's guidance? While language had been built up in a process that took centuries, Sicard felt that his task was to facilitate the development of sign language for deaf children who could not benefit from previous generations while they were building their own, with only their needs and desires for reference. Signs were fundamental to thought for Sicard and his peers—especially Philippe Pinel and Destutt de Tracy—who gathered as a group of *idéologues* at the turn of the century (Chappey 2002; Moravia 1974). If speech's role was not merely to express thought but to serve as the very instrument of thought, then sign language was accordingly to be the instrument of thought used by deaf people. Far beyond any tool for expression, for Sicard a dictionary was a means of laying foundations for thinking and was the best precaution against incorrectness and vagueness. Providing deaf pupils with a good system of signs meant not only enhancing communication, but also fostering their thoughts in a coherent way. The teacher's role was not merely to record the signs invented by the pupils, but to help the pupils construct one sign from another, mimicking the relationship between words. Just as an adverb could be built from an adjective by adding an ending in phonological French, or a noun and an adjective from a verb, Sicard argued in the legacy of de l'Épée that one could make a series of signs starting from one sign and adding others to change it from a verb to a noun or to an adjective or an adverb. To support his method, he organized his dictionary into sections of concrete nouns (ordered like a nomenclature by topic), followed by verbs, articles, adjectives, conjunctions, conjugations, and adverbs.

Sicard wrote that his objective was to “put [words] into action” (Sicard 1808b, title page) instead of defining words. The signs he described progressively characterized their objects, describing the con-

texts of their use. One could mime the action usually done with each object—for example, “sitting down” for a chair. Often, several options are given. An apple could be represented by the action of biting or peeling and then eating, or even by the color and nice taste. However, looking at the descriptions in all their complexity and abstraction, the reader can only wonder how often they backfired. Abstract descriptions most often involved going from the general to the particular. These were not signs invented by pupils but by a teacher eager to place logic before inspiration. In fact, the sole ground rule put forth by de l’Epée and Sicard concerning the creation of signs by deaf pupils and the role of teachers in recording and coordinating these signs turned into a mirage. In class, teachers adjusted the signs pupils used in the interests of methodical thought. The result was that outside of class, pupils resorted to their own signs, which deviated from the ones in the dictionary.

Half a century after Sicard published his dictionary, the problems and challenges were largely unchanged. Teachers’ publications often underlined the multiplicity and possible interchangeability of signs to express ideas, while emphasizing that the appropriate facial expression was absolutely necessary for comprehension. All insisted that signs functioned only with the appropriate physiognomy. Without it, signs might fall back into unexpressive gesture. Giving life to a sign in sign language, in other words, appeared to involve more than just using a word in a sentence. Strikingly, everyone agreed that the face had to espouse the idea expressed. Though sign language was promoted as a universal language, it was also supposed to convey the very individual emotions of particular signers and to transmit their singularity. A generation before, Johann Caspar Lavater had published volumes on physiognomy, codifying the expression of the face (Lavater 1775–1778). On the contrary, sign language advocates presented the understanding of facial expression as a natural gift. While mentioning physiognomy as a crucial part of communication, these advocates also stated that it did not need to be described in a dictionary. The need to defend the teaching of sign language against increasing criticism led Abbé Laveau to state in an essay addressed to the prefects that sign language had not yet been definitively created—that, in fact, it was continually created, on a daily basis, as needs arose, which inevitably

led to disparities. He claimed that even if they were taught different signs, deaf pupils would be able to understand each other without difficulty (Laveau 1860).

A Formal Challenge

Even though sign language was not phonetic, the use of written French in these dictionaries recast sign language as a servant of French instead of presenting it as a language unto itself. The description of the gestures provided instructions depending on the understanding of words. Dictionaries still espoused the alphabetic structure of written language to give an idea of the movements combined as a sign. How could signs enter the alphabetical format of a dictionary? In the middle of the nineteenth century, two teachers inaugurated dictionaries that were much better adapted to daily use. The use of drawings in Brouland's and Pélissier's dictionaries provided an impetus to think through a different relationship to language. This new generation of lexicographers aimed not for quantity, but for a reference work of signs in circulation. What they offered was a chance to go beyond Sicard's syntactical frame of sign language and think instead about language in signs—that is, the specific ways in which communication occurs in physical signs. Using signs, for Brouland and Pélissier, meant using a language that stood on its own. By positioning themselves outside the authority of the *logos*, their dictionaries established a new expertise through sign by collecting references that emerged out of the fluidity of signing. Even if they lacked the temporality and the three dimensions so precious in videos of sign language today, Pélissier and Brouland's dictionaries circumvented that difficulty by adding arrows to the represented figures (figures 1, 11–15). Beyond that, signs were not to stand for words on a one-to-one basis. The challenge was, then, to create a dictionary that could account for signs independent from the constraints of spoken enunciation, freed from prepositions and conjunctions that articulated spoken French. Just as the French poet Malherbe, who two centuries before had “purified” French by proscribing derivatives, condemning diminutives and substantives formed from adjectives, and discarding technical terms, poet Pélissier relieved his sign language dictionary of all of the excessive information



FIGURE 11. Abbé Lelièvre, *Dictionnaire de Signes*, ms. Undated. Bretteville sur Odon, Communauté du Bon sauveur

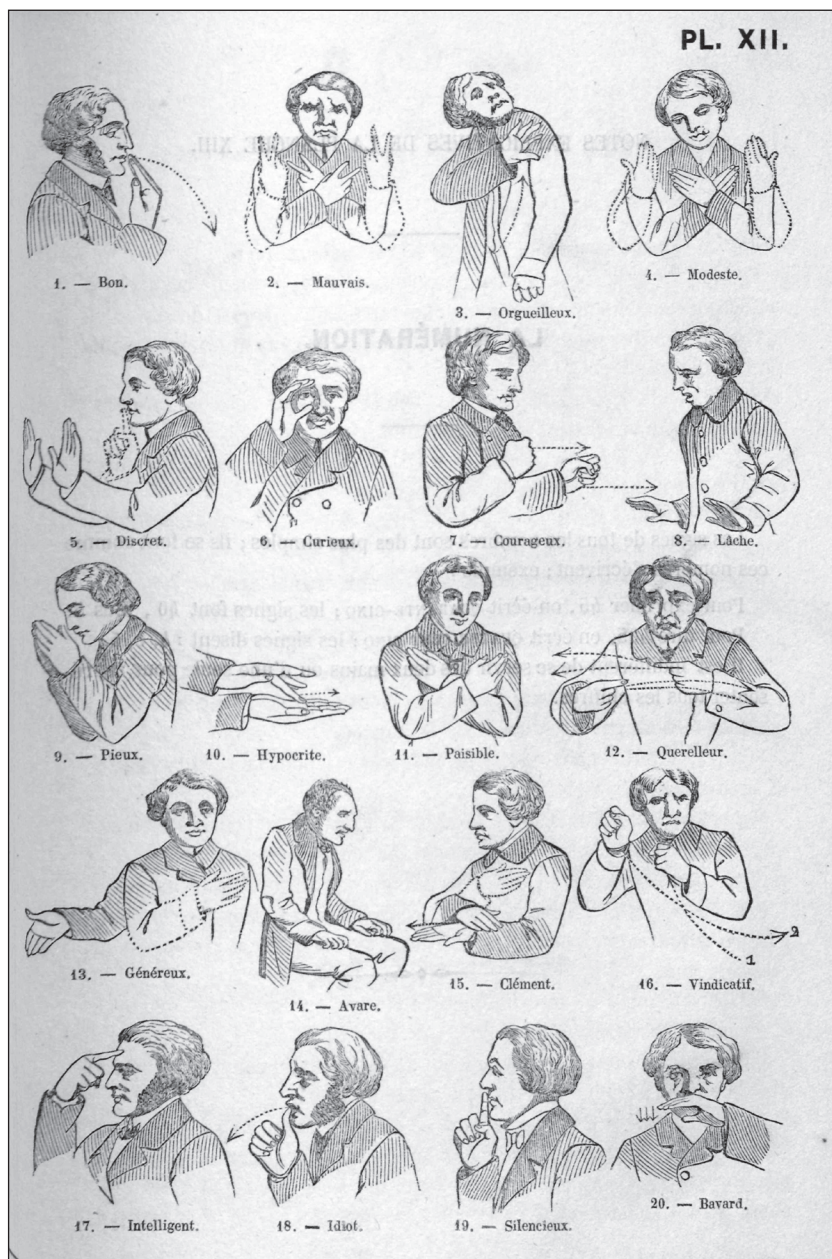


FIGURE 12. Pélissier, Pierre. 1855. *L'Enseignement primaire des sourds-muets, mis à la portée de tout le monde, avec une iconographie des signes*. Paris: Paul Dupont. Table XII. Bibliothèque Diderot de Lyon.

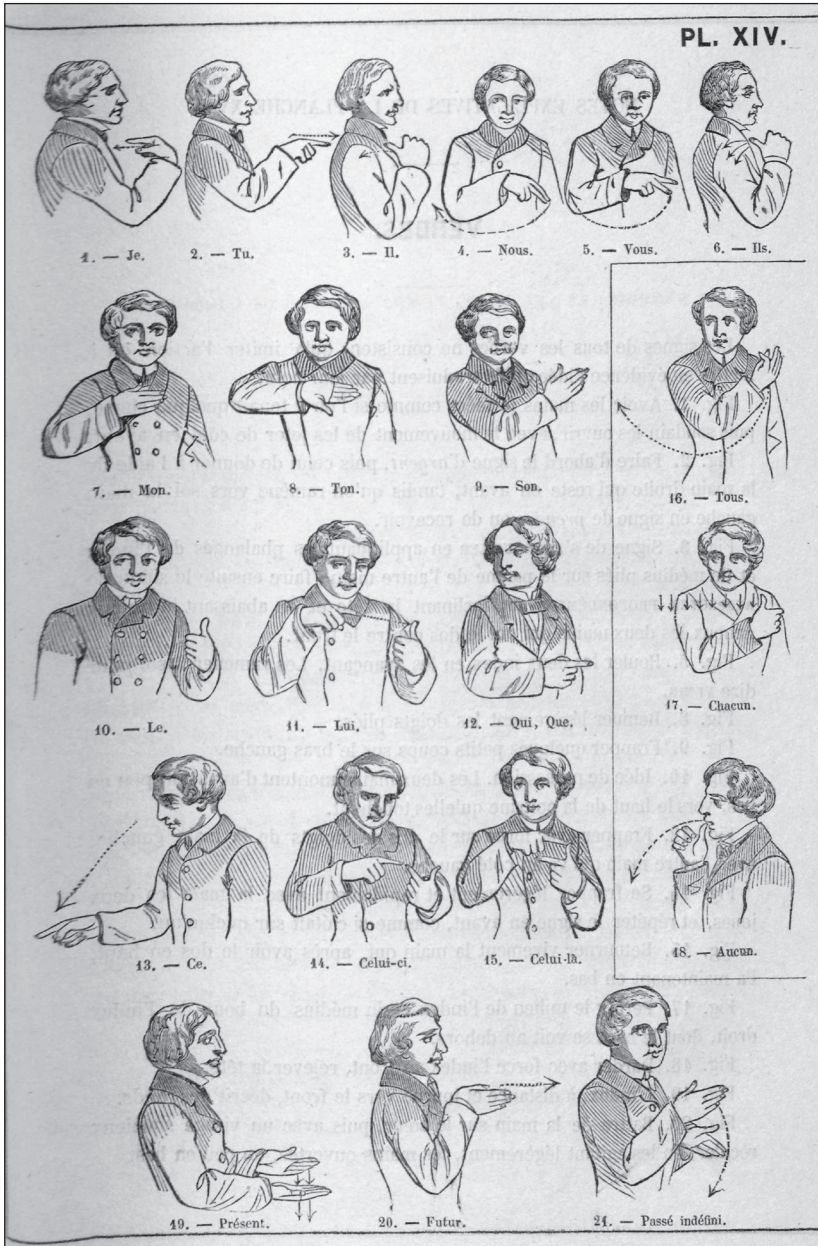


FIGURE 13. Pélissier, Pierre. 1855. *L'Enseignement primaire des sourds-muets, mis à la portée de tout le monde, avec une iconographie des signes*. Paris: Paul Dupont. Table XIV. Bibliothèque Diderot de Lyon.

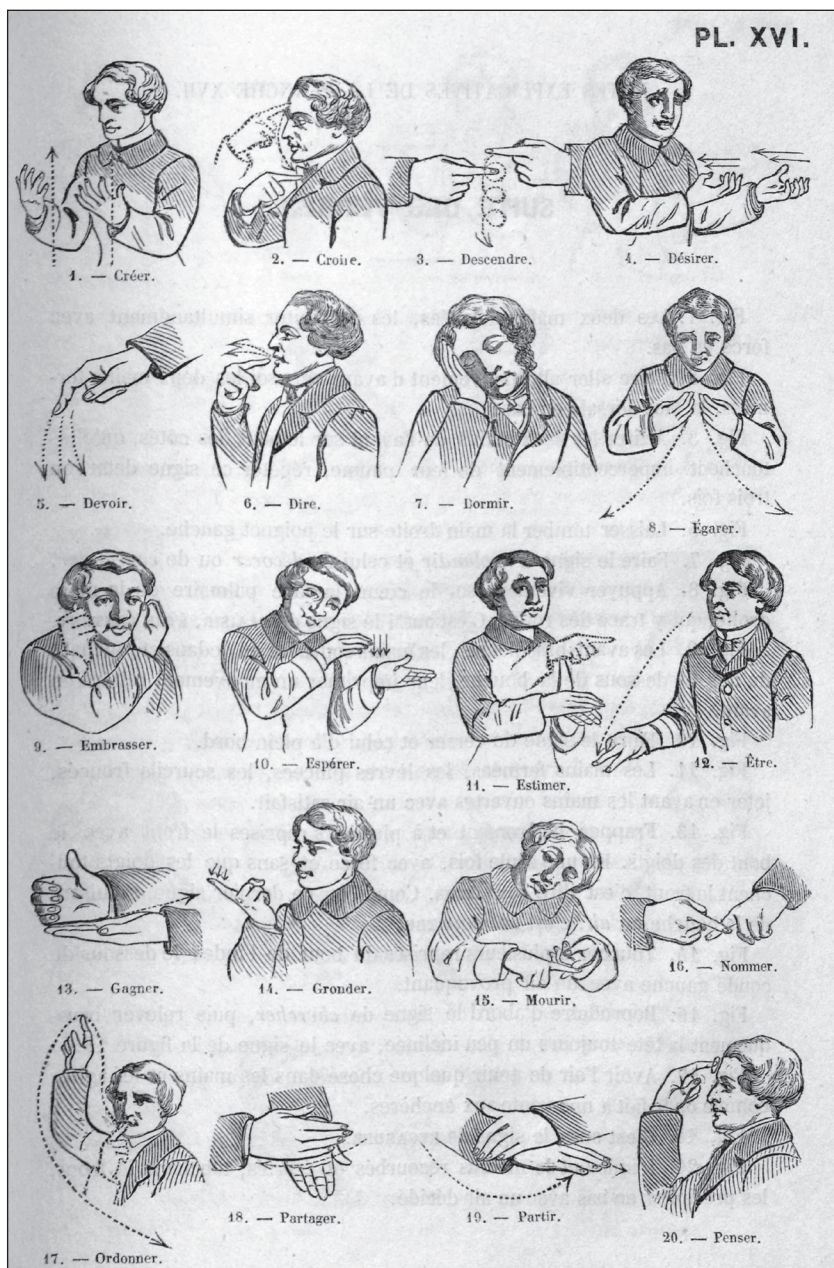


FIGURE 14. Pélissier, Pierre. 1855. *L'Enseignement primaire des sourds-muets, mis à la portée de tout le monde, avec une iconographie des signes*. Paris: Paul Dupont. Table XVI. Bibliothèque Diderot de Lyon.



FIGURE 15. Pélissier, Pierre. 1855. *L'Enseignement primaire des sourds-muets, mis à la portée de tout le monde, avec une iconographie des signes*. Paris: Paul Dupont. Table XX. Bibliothèque Diderot de Lyon.

previous lexicographers had wanted to load their dictionaries with. By offering one sign for an expression or by including verbs and adverbs in a single sign or prepositions, article, and nouns together in another sign, Brouland and Pélissier began to formalize the shift that occurred in the construction of sign language.

Pélissier's dictionary took the shape of a book with a series of tables of drawings organized like a nomenclature, by theme. For someone unsure of a word or its spelling, such an organization facilitated searching, allowing a reader to look through the table until they found the correct expression for a movement, an emotion, and so forth. Pélissier insisted that everything that existed, everything one could do or think, could be "imitated with the arms" (Pélissier 1856, 3). For him, the plurality of expressions for a single thought came from the absence of grammatical rules in sign language, an absence that allowed sign language to fit thought. He reminded his readers that the definition of a word can be phrased in several different ways, and he positioned sign language as able to encompass an equivalent plurality of gestures. The versatility of physical signs was, according to him, better adapted to the flexibility of thought and better able to render its shifts and movements than phonological language.

The tables show a collection of hand positions, as well as portraits with various orientations of the head and trunk. The direction of the gaze can also at times be distinguished. These charts act as a testimony of the time and show that the challenge lay in apprehending not only language, but the body itself. They demanded thinking in a three-dimensional way and positioning one's movements in relation to an interlocutor who might be lying down, sitting, or standing. The left-hand page contains comments on the signs drawn in the table on the right-hand page.

Brouland was more radical. Her dictionary took the form of a large poster with drawings of signing figures, complemented by descriptions in a booklet, *Explanation of a Dictionary of Mimic Signs*. As long as a dictionary remained in the format of a book, it could not, strictly speaking, be a bilingual dictionary. The format of the poster allowed one, instead, to search across it for the meaning of a sign. Brouland provided short descriptions for a series of signs in the booklet, which

put forth thought as movements but did not provide any definitions; rather, the booklet included descriptions of the gestures captured by the images of the table, which were depictions of psychological states, activities, or things. Here is an excerpt of the descriptions she gave:

FORCE, POWERFUL: throwing the fists forward with an abrupt move

FEAR, TO FEAR: withdrawing the fist backward; the body follows the same movement; physiognomy expresses fear

JEALOUSY, JEALOUS: biting one's fingertip. Physiognomy expresses jealousy

CANDY: sucking one's fingertip

TO NOTICE: moving a finger toward what one is designating

TO BEG, TO REQUEST: directing one's eyes at the sky or toward the person or persons one is appealing to (Brouland 1855, 7)

To avoid the specifics of spoken French, verbs were not to be conjugated. Brouland's stated aim was to make it possible for anyone to learn the signs on their own, so that they could then teach the deaf people around them. She never extended her dictionary beyond the 132 signs she drew for the sample, so it offered a useful but limited document for everyday communication.

When Pélissier began working in collaboration with Grosselin, they offered the most accomplished strategy for a strictly bilingual dictionary. While we can only hope that the set of cards they developed will one day be discovered in some archive, the prospectus published in 1857 describing the set gives us a fair description of the work and reproduces four cards recto and verso. On one side, the card depicted the sign with a drawing; on the other it listed the word in Latin, Greek, Italian, Spanish, French, English, and German, adding for each of them the pronunciation with stenographic signs. By doing so, Pélissier and Grosselin fully overcame the challenge of a bilingual dictionary. One could search by sign or by word and navigate one's way through the cards. Pélissier and Grosselin emphasized that a user could select specific ranges of cards and order them for pedagogic purposes. There would be great satisfaction for pupils, Pélissier wrote, when they could see materially how many cards they had already learned. Additionally, the cards, when used to learn foreign languages, would

familiarize hearing-speaking pupils with sign language and accelerate the day when sign language would become a universal language.

While present-day activist struggles to preserve sign languages have presented them as established languages, almost ahistorical, whose integrity has been repeatedly threatened from the outside, the documents I have described here show the rich multiplicity of sign languages that were created in the nineteenth century. The lack of an established common reference highlights the fact that, at the time, the universality of sign language was a strategic claim to defend the value of sign language and not a concrete aim per se at this stage. Even in France, where throughout the nineteenth century teachers were the most engaged advocates of the importance of sign language for education, the limited attempts to coordinate these efforts toward the standardization of signs at a time when national initiatives were increasingly valued reflects the fact that it was not a priority for anyone—teachers or deaf people or administrators. What this article has tried to show is that the challenges were many, and priorities lay elsewhere. More than divisions between teachers, institutes, or methods, though, it was the singularity of sign language's development that kept eluding all attempts to represent, stabilize, and standardize it. All involved agreed that the dictionaries' purpose was not to definitively settle the correctness of one sign over another, but to favor thinking in a coherent system of signs. Regardless of the diversity of actors who undertook the conception of a dictionary—hearing teachers, deaf teachers, members of the clergy, physicians—no singular authorship was to be claimed in the invention of signs; rather, the signs were to be validated by clarity, intelligibility, and ease of use.

This, in turn, could only work against the legitimization of sign language, a lesson linguist William Stokoe fully understood in 1960 when he published his American Sign Language dictionary and a grammar of sign language—the two publications responsible for sign language finally being acknowledged as a proper language (Stokoe 1960, 1993; Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg 1965). Over the past sixty years, the publication of sign language dictionaries and grammars has constituted a crucial asset in the diffusion and standardization of sign languages. They have dramatically changed the development of

sign languages, which have, for the first time, been acknowledged as languages in their own right (Johnston 2003). Where the flow of signs previously might have taken precedence over singular signs, dictionaries have in the meantime changed the status of signs, as well as the relationship of interlocutors to sign. While physiognomy played an extremely important role, the charting of facial signs and of the entire body have structured sign language in increasingly codified ways. In the nineteenth century, no sign could ever really be “wrong,” but now sign language can itself be the object of evaluation. In addition to Elix, the online dictionary of French Sign Language, and Spreadthesign, which offers translations of written words in up to twenty-eight sign languages, a host of online platforms and research teams such as LS-Colin, Dictasign, and Evasigne now focus on the possibilities offered by the new technologies for the collection, evaluation, and analysis of sign language corpuses (Braffort 2016). However, while these dictionaries have allowed an increasing number of hearing-speaking people to learn sign language and have facilitated the assessment of several national diplomas in sign language, signers commonly say that to learn a new sign, the signing community remains the primary source of reference. Unlike spoken French, whose correctness is attested in a written source, signs find their validation by being in circulation. By favoring use over registration in a corpus of signs, the signing community seems to perpetuate its independence from dictionaries, emphasizing the dimension of language that is constantly fluctuating and facilitating its capacity to diversify and mutate along with society’s transformations.

Notes

1. In the context of this article, I avoid using *Deaf* with a capital “D” because of its anachronistic character. Following Annelies Kusters, Maartje de Meulder, and Dai O’Brien’s position in their introduction to their book *Innovations in Deaf Studies*, I have decided to use the term *deaf* with a small “d” as the most inclusive term throughout the article, when no other term is prompted by the context (Kusters, de Meulder, and O’Brien 2017, 13–15). For historical accuracy, I retain the terms *deaf-mute* and *deaf* and *mute* when they are used in quotes and in the title of the institutions. At the time of de l’Épée and Pierre Desloges, the appellation in use was *deaf and mutes*. The compound word *deaf-mute* circulated in France from the French Revolution, when it was decided to create several “National Institutes for Deaf-Mutes.”

2. I would like to thank the Sœurs de l'Évangile, and especially Thérèse Lebrun, for opening their archives to me and for their hospitality.

3. *Dictionnaire du langage universel des signes avec dessins complets, préparé depuis 1850 comme un monument unique et nouveau à ce jour, qui est prêt en grande partie, verra le jour par livraisons et contiendra environ vingt mille figures entières, soigneusement dessinées par Metivier, sourd-muet.*

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