

CULTURE/LANGUAGE NOTES

Maintaining Continuity in Relationships

One day, a Deaf woman was invited to a beginning ASL class. The instructor introduced the woman by giving information about her community ties and her personal life. Then students were asked to introduce themselves, and include information such as marital status, number of children, line of work, and any other personal comments. The visitor chatted briefly about these things with each student. (There were about twenty students in the class.) After the last student introduced herself, she jokingly said to the visitor, "That's a lot to remember." The visitor replied, "I remember most of it," and proceeded to amaze the class by going around the room restating information about each student, pointing out similarities between students' lives, and recalling personal comments.

The students thought the visitor had an exceptional memory. The instructor explained, however, that she possessed no extraordinary talent, but rather reflected a learned cultural behavior. She had done what most Deaf persons do naturally she attended to information that establishes a person's community ties, that assists her in identifying that person to others in the community, and that helps her maintain continuity in the relationship (or in this case the "acquaintanceship").

Deaf culture is called a "high-context" culture. Deaf people have an extensive information-sharing network among families, friends, and community members, and are involved in a host of familiar relationships. Among Deaf people, there is a great deal of shared knowledge, common experiences, goals and beliefs, common friends and acquaintances, a common way of talking; that is, their lives share a common context.

When two Deaf people meet for the first time, they establish this context by giving information about their community ties. They attend to specific information and retain it. When they meet again, they expect each other to remember their previous exchange and will begin to talk from that basis. Each will learn a little more about the other, which in turn will be remembered. This maintains continuity not only in that relationship; the information is fed back into the information-sharing network to help contextualize each person in relationship to the overall fabric of the community.

As you begin to meet Deaf people in and out of the classroom, you should volunteer information about yourself and make a point of retaining relevant information about others. The next time you meet, you should be able to recall the information exchanged in the first meeting, and from that context begin to build a relationship. Your ability to maintain continuity in relationships depends on your ability to remember relevant information about people. This developed skill will allow you to understand and participate in conversational patterns common in the Deaf community.