Presented by Chris Ledgard.

Chris Ledgard: Hello. This week we’re exploring the languages used by deaf people, and one in seven of us in the UK is deaf or hard of hearing, according to figures produced by the Medical Research Council. The ways to communicate are imaginative and varied, including lip-reading, speaking and sign language – which for some people is the first language they learn.

Extract: from interview. Charlie Swinbourne talking about his daughter:

Charlie: Martha’s been signing since around ten months old. She would sign Mummy, and if she couldn’t see her mum and she was you know perhaps a little bit distressed I could sign to her oh Mummy – and I would say Mummy’s coming – but I would sign Mummy with my hand and she would settle down with that.

Chris: Charlie Swinbourne, who I’ll be talking to later in the programme.

But first I went to a café in Soho in London to meet the artist and writer Louise Stern. She grew up in California, the fourth generation to be born deaf in her family. And when I met Louise it was a real first for me – Louise used sign language and her long-time collaborator and interpreter, Oliver Pouliot, translated her signs into spoken English for me. So the voice you’ll hear in this interview is Oliver’s, but the words are Louise’s. I asked Louise about the book of short stories she’s just published, called Chattering.

Louise: I wanted basically to look at language and how it distorts our relationship with the world in many ways, but at the same time how necessary it is, and so approaching it from both extremes is what I try to bring forward in the book. For me the deaf experience brings out both of those extremes in an interesting and personal way.

Chris: Here we are in Soho, you’re a young woman in your early thirties, I’ll describe you slightly so people can imagine you, with long dark hair, very elegant signer, it’s very interesting to watch. When you sign, your mouth is very expressive, your lips move …

Louise: It’s funny because there’s deaf people who have different relationships with how they express things on their mouth while signing. My brother for example doesn’t move his mouth at all, and many people in the deaf community, if you don’t move your mouth, it’s somewhat of a … it means that you’re a more beautiful signer. And it makes you more Deaf. It’s actually a way to describe someone in sign language: like “that guy over there, he is straight-lipped, full-signing”.

Chris: Ah.

Louise: But I grew up with speech lessons, even though my first language is definitely sign language and English is my second language, I grew up with speech lessons, and when I was growing up the fashion in deaf education at the time was to mouth in English at the same time you would be signing. But I have to admit, with Oliver and with this interview I am using my mouthing a little bit more. If I was with my deaf friends, I would be mouthing much less.
I think speech is a good thing, but the problem is if you grow up not knowing sign language, and later you’re not able to speak very well as a deaf person, you’re not comfortable anywhere. You’ll be even less comfortable with hearing people than I am, as a non-speaker. I’m comfortable with hearing people because I have a language that allows me to write down things with hearing people, to be comfortable here with you and Oliver, but if you have neither — so if your voice kind of doesn’t work in the end — you’re in for it.

Chris: I interviewed someone called Charlie Swinbourne the other day who has reviewed your book and is a big admirer of your book, and he and I were talking about this sense of a deaf “aristocracy”, that, partly to do with how many generations in your family deafness goes back, but also I guess to do with what you were just saying about whether you move your mouth, the kind of sign language you use - is this a big issue in the deaf community?

Louise: Definitely. The deaf community is status-obsessed [laughs]. You’d be surprised actually, especially in America I think, I don’t know why but the way that the community is set up in America is different than it is here. There are some deaf families who everyone knows and people really look up to and there definitely is a sense of that, yes.

Chris: Can you tell us a bit about your working life? You work for Sam Taylor-Wood, is that right, the film-maker and artist – what do you do for her?

Louise: Oh it’s pretty loose. Yesterday I was organising some of her work in the studio, basically recording it, archiving it, putting it away; sometimes I’ll be there on shoots helping her out; sometimes I’ll try to deal with some of the people that she works with, on her behalf.

Chris: And does your job involve a mixture then of dealing with deaf people and hearing people?

Louise: With Sam? Definitely not, everyone’s hearing.

Chris: And so when you’re communicating are you using … because you can’t have Oliver with you the whole time [laughs] presumably, are you using a mixture of signing, writing - how does it work?

Louise: Well Sam knows one sign, which is “tea” [laughs]. Oh no no, she does know another sign, she knows “tea” and “thank you”. But Sam and I get on really well and we communicate by writing back and forth to each other, I have a funny story actually … Sam was just invited to the Glamour Awards, with her fiancé Aaron — they both received an award, and she asked me and her other assistant to come along that night so we went, and Sam and I were writing to each other throughout the dinner. Just little things, nothing deep. And the next day in the Daily Mail I read it said: “Sam Taylor-Wood was writing love letters to her boyfriend the whole time through the Glamour Awards” and I’m like “er no - she was talking to me!” [general laughter]

Chris: That laugh belongs to Louise Stern, who is speaking in sign language, and the voice is that of Oliver Pouliot, her interpreter. Both of them grew up with American Sign Language as their first language, so I asked them how it differed from British Sign Language.

Louise: British Sign Language has a very different genealogy than American Sign Language. It’s very different, and it’s not the same kind of difference that you see between the Queen’s English and American English. The sign languages developed in different ways. The sign language in America comes from a mix of invented signs from colonial America, from deaf people who lived at that time, and French sign language, because the first teacher of the deaf in America was a French deaf man. So from those beginnings American Sign Language evolved. So British Sign Language evolved from a hearing family called the Braidwood family, and they made their living – this is way back – by teaching deaf children who came from wealthy families, and the Braidwood family invented their own code, as you will, and from those beginnings British Sign Language evolved and has become the full language that it is now. The roots of the two languages as you can see are very different.
Chris: Is it easy to move between the two? Did it take a long time to learn the British system?

Louise: I lived in Israel for a year when I was 16, and learned Israeli Sign Language. I’ve travelled quite a bit and it’s always been easy for me to pick up other sign languages. Not every deaf person is going to pick up other sign languages quickly. I think if you grow up going to a school for the deaf and you know people with a different range of signing abilities, there’s some kind of core to sign language which is very iconic and gestural, and if you’re comfortable with that core I think it’s easy to transfer that over to another sign language.

Chris: To find out more about British Sign Language - or BSL - our reporter Sally Heaven went to the University of Bristol’s Centre for Deaf Studies, which is the only one in the UK. Again, the first interviewee you hear is speaking in sign language, using an interpreter.

Linda Day: Hello, I’m Linda Day, I’m the BSL Director for the Centre for Deaf Studies, at the University of Bristol.

Sally: How many people in the UK use BSL?

Linda: That’s an interesting question. If you’re thinking about deaf people who are BSL users, it’s approximately 70 to 100,000. But if you’re thinking about sign language users, including hearing people learning sign language, at all levels, those figures increase by great amounts.

I have a deaf daughter, myself, and so we’ve grown up signing, and people will come up to us and say: “Oh, how can you communicate without sound? And people are fascinated by it, and they look at your expressions, and the speed of your signs, and things like that, and people do become fascinated with it, almost as an art form. And it can be very theatrical, there’s signed poetry that people become very interested in, so there’s lots of rich elements to the language that draw people in I think.

Sally: How does BSL grammar work?

Linda: If you think about spoken languages, there are different orders that appear in different languages throughout the world. And BSL would have our own distinct order, in terms of how signs are presented. For example, in English you would say a man is standing on a bridge. And in BSL, you would sign the bridge first, you would set that up, that’s the rule, then you would have the man standing on the bridge, it’s a visual image of what’s happening. You couldn’t sign man / stand / on / the bridge, it wouldn’t make sense, you have to think of it in a visual picture. If you were drawing a picture you might draw the bridge first and then put the man standing on it. So it has to make sense, so it’s a totally different order in BSL than how it would be in English. Also another interesting difference is that in spoken English you can’t use two words at the same time. Obviously that’s not possible. In BSL you can use both hands to do a different sign, so in BSL you can sign boy on one hand – it’s one finger which is placed on the chin – and then with your other hand you can indicate the size of the boy, and you can say “little boy” at the same time with one sign.

Sally: Where we’d have a word in English, is there a sign for every word?

Linda: There are many many items that there are a direct translation for, and there are some that aren’t. For example, often when signing on television, interpreting or presenting, you’d have a concept or a term in English and it would have to be expanded in BSL, so more signs would be used to explain that one word or concept.

Sally: Facial expressions are also important in BSL, am I right in saying that?

Linda: Facial expressions are vital for showing emotions, for showing questions. So where hearing people would use tone of voice to indicate questions, we use our eyebrows and our facial expressions to say whether something’s a statement or a question.
Sally: And what's its status as a language, within the UK?

Linda: If we think about the examples of the Welsh language, and Gaelic in Scotland that have been officially recognised, we wanted the same for BSL, as the fourth UK language. And it was officially recognised, in 2003.

We also have regional varieties, like you do in English spoken languages, there are accents and dialects, it works the same in sign language, so there are accents as such in BSL, there are regional dialects that work within the language. And now things have become more informal, and there’s more influence between how young people use sign language, and slang items and things like that.

Sally: I’m really interested to hear some examples of signs that have changed over the years..

Linda: If I could give an example of the telephone. The old sign used to be one hand held to the ear and one hand held to the mouth, to show how the old-fashioned piece of technology looked. Then it moved to a one-handed sign, to kind of indicate the one-handed telephone, and now the hand shape has changed, to reflect mobile phones, and maybe with 3G technology and people using video technology the sign will change again, and the sign then becomes agreed.

Sally: When you say agreed, how does that work? I mean presumably it’s fairly organic..

Linda: If you think about the media, and TV for example, people are watching signed programmes, and it becomes very popular, it’s a kind of convention then becomes that that sign is ok to use.

Sally: Are there any signs that are used which have become obsolete because they’re inappropriate?

Linda: That’s a very interesting issue. There are a few signs that have changed. For example, the old sign for India used to be a finger in the middle of the forehead to represent the kind of bindi, and then in the kind of politically correct times of the 80’s and 90’s people were thinking that was a racist sign, there was a lot of panic and uproar about that, and when more research was done it found that within sign languages those kind of things are acceptable, and in India people use a different hand shape but the same location on the head to sign their country. We tried for a while to use a sign that indicated the outline of the map of India, but now we became more aware, that it wasn’t actually racist in the visual language to use that kind of metaphor, especially with using appropriate facial expressions. For example the sign for China, which indicates the sort of shape of Chinese people’s eyes, but with the appropriate facial expression it’s not at all insulting. With an inappropriate facial expression it could be, in the way that language can be. And we actually asked some people what they thought about that, from China, and they were saying: “It’s fine, we think of European people as having big round eyes”, because in the visual modality that’s the way it works.

Rachel Sutton-Spence: I’m Rachel Sutton-Spence, I’m a Reader in Deaf Studies at the University of Bristol. It’s interesting what you were saying about the differences between sexist and racist language. One of the other things that is probably worth thinking about of course is there are different sorts of taboos and value judgements in the deaf community that’s reflected in sign language, than there is in the wider hearing community that would be reflected in speech. So for example one sign that has changed over the years is the sign to refer to a hearing person. And in the past, a sign that would refer to a hearing person was made with a hand shape that has the thumb up, like in the thumbs up, everything alright? So there was some sort of implication in that sign that meant that to be hearing was to be good. And a few decades ago a group of deaf people were thinking: “Are we sure we really like that sort of value judgement within the sign?” And so over the years now that sign has faded away – you still see it, but you don’t see it nearly as often as the same sign that is now made with the hand shape that just has the index finger up instead of the thumb, so it doesn’t mean so much a hearing person is a good thing anymore.
Sally: Another thing that someone said to me once is that BSL can be a bit more blunt, and honest, than speaking English. They gave the example of describing someone as being fat … that’s something that would perhaps be more acceptable in BSL than it would be in English.

Rachel: Sign languages are much more visual than spoken languages. And because, certainly within British culture, there is a taboo against talking about somebody’s physical appearance, I think sometimes it looks like the languages are much more blunt. Believe me, you can refer to somebody in BSL as the fact that they have slightly protruding teeth, or that they are a certain size or a certain height, and just mean: “I’m talking about somebody who you will recognise as having teeth like that or being that size or being that height”. So they may seem more blunt but it’s just because they’re visual.

Sally: How literal do signs tend to be?

Rachel: Sign languages are very richly metaphorical languages. Because they’re visually based, there’s an enormous scope for play, for metaphor, so for example one way that I could be really surprised could be to use a sign that shows that my jaw is dropping, or perhaps that my eyes were popping out. And then you can play with this idea, so for example if your eyes were very tired, because obviously deaf people watching perhaps a lecture for a long time would get tired eyes, they could perhaps sign taking their eyes out, popping them somewhere nice and cool, perhaps running them under water, and putting them back in again. If you’ve got a sign for switch something off, you just might turn your hand to show that you were switching something off, but if you want to switch off your ears you can just turn off at the location where your ears are. If you don’t want to think anymore you could put that switch off at your head, and you’d be switching your mind off. So we can play games like that.

Chris: Rachel Sutton-Spence talking to Sally Heaven at the Bristol Centre for Deaf Studies.

Charlie Swinbourne is a deaf journalist and scriptwriter who grew up in a deaf family, but went to a mainstream school, so he flits between the deaf and hearing worlds, using both sign language and speech. He talks about being “hard of hearing”:

Charlie Swinbourne: I use the phrase “hard of hearing" because I feel it’s the way of describing how much I can hear that I think most people seem to understand, and guess just how much I’ll be able to do, before I’ve met them. I’m sort of moderate to severely deaf, I wore a hearing aid since I was two years old. I can use sign language but obviously a lot of the time I do speak. But the definitions really vary and there’s some people who really don’t like the phrases “hard of hearing", they don’t like “hearing impaired", but in the end all deaf people are a bit different from each other - you know some deaf people were born in a deaf family, other people with a hearing family, some went to a deaf school, others were educated in mainstream, some signed from birth, some were … you know, spoke orally, so we do use these different phrases to try and sum it up.

Chris: So why don’t some people like “hard of hearing” or “hearing impaired”?

Charlie: I think they feel that the phrases almost suggest that there’s something missing or there’s something that’s reduced, and they feel that as a deaf person they are of no less value than a hearing person.

Chris: So sign language, which you use – is there a kind of a cool, hip sign language that you’d find perhaps amongst a certain generation, particularly in a place like London, that you wouldn’t understand if you came from somewhere else, or if you were of an older generation.

Charlie: Definitely. There’s, in London you’ll find more people using signs like “wicked”, and that’ll be a very cool kind of … . it’ll just be thrown out there with the hand, and it’s like a flick of the wrist really. My partner teaches in a deaf school in south London, and she teaches English through sign language, and one thing she’s told me is that a lot of the pupils have sign names for all of the footballers in the World Cup. So for example a footballer like the
Brazilian Ronaldinho – he didn’t make it to this World Cup - but his sign was very much related to his teeth, so …

Chris: He’s got these great big kind of rabbit teeth hasn’t he [laughs], for want of a better word.

Charlie: Exactly, he’s got very prominent teeth, so the sign was … with two front teeth sticking out, and it’s made with two fingers that go into your mouth. And other footballers they have their own … they’ve got their own characteristics, and they quickly translate into sign language.

Chris: And you’ve got one daughter, and you’re expecting another daughter fairly soon … um, your daughter Martha is a completely hearing baby?

Charlie: Yes, absolutely.

Chris: Yeah. And was that something that you were expecting, or not?

Charlie: Myself and my partner, we’re both deaf to varying levels. My partner’s a bit more deaf than I am, and we were aware that with deaf relatives on either side that there was a chance that our baby could be deaf, but we were very open to that, we had no preference either way.

Chris: So is Martha then picking up both signing, and speaking?

Charlie: Yes, Martha’s been signing since around ten months old. And her signing really was six months ahead of the rest of her communication. So she really began speaking a lot more six months after she was already signing very clearly, certain things like Mummy, and if she couldn’t see her mum and she was you know perhaps a little bit distressed I could sign to her oh Mummy, you know Mummy’s – and I would say Mummy’s coming – but I would sign Mummy with my hand, and the sign for Mummy is like an M, it’s sort of three fingers which make an M, which usually would go on your hand but they go on your head, and you tap it against your head, and that would settle her down because she sort of knew that I understood why she was a little bit upset, and she would settle down with that sort of recognition.

So language from a very early age was there for us, because we have that understanding of sign language.

Chris: So that’s really enhanced the degree of communication you have with a baby, compared to someone who just is trying to talk, you’ve got this kind of dual thing going on, and a fantastic thing to have.

Charlie: Definitely. We feel really enriched by it.

Chris: And lip-reading, which is another thing that you, and many other people who are deaf, or hard of hearing, whatever term you want to use … lip-reading’s a very important tool isn’t it? Does lip-reading become easier or more difficult depending on who you’re talking to?

Charlie: It’s much easier to lip-read someone when you know them really well, and you get used to their lip patterns, you get used to the kind of words they say. People say that lip-reading is around 80% guesswork …

Chris: that much?

Charlie: Absolutely. It might be that you get a sentence and you pick out, you know maybe you understand very clearly three words out of ten, and you fill in those gaps, and if you know the subject you’re talking about, if you know the person well, then it’s much easier to fill in those gaps. The other thing is some people mumble, some people, you know they have a big beard and you can’t really see their lips very clearly. People have a habit of looking away halfway through a conversation. And those things can make it a lot harder. But the best thing is when you really know someone well, and actually they don’t have to exaggerate their
lip patterns, they can just speak normally, and you can then become able to lip-read them much more easily. I did realise about two years ago that I was saying “walk” … I was saying it with a very pronounced “l”, and my partner really noticed it, partly because she was lip-reading me …

Chris: So “walk” [pronouncing the “l”]

Charlie: Yeah. And it irritated her ‘cos I said walk, er, walk, I’m not sure if I’m even saying it right now, but she noticed it as I said it, I was making the “l” shape with my tongue, as I said it with an “l”, my tongue would go up towards the top of my mouth, and I finally realised that you don’t pronounce the “l” in walk, you say “walk”. I mean I’ve worked hard on my speech over the years and there’s a tendency that you try and pronounce everything really correctly, but sometimes you do follow how things are written, because you don’t hear so accurately, that as life goes on you really know how to say those words just because in passing, you’ve heard them.

Chris: That’s fascinating isn’t it, that it was your partner, who has less hearing than you, through watching your … through lip-reading, worked out that you were actually mispronouncing something.

Charlie: Absolutely. And … well no-one else said anything, so I realised that I should really tie her down and propose to her because at least she could be honest with me!

Chris: Is there any sense of hierarchy within the deaf community, is there any sense that if you were born into a family which goes back three or four generations of being deaf, that in some way your experience is more solid, or more rooted in the deaf community, than someone who say, became deaf in the course of their life?

Charlie: There is. There’s definitely a hierarchy in the sense of … I mean, it’s within the core community really who would perceive that, who would see a value in someone who has all those generations who were deaf, who signed, who were very aware of the deaf culture. And I think in a sense it’s almost, I think a lot of people growing up in maybe a hearing family they felt different from perhaps the people around them, and they look at someone who grew up in a deaf family and had access to that communication from a really young age. And I think they see something positive about that, that that person had all those influences around them, they never felt different and they were able just to be a really, I guess a strong deaf person from day one. And I wouldn’t say that excludes other people necessarily but I think there is definitely a sense that, within the core community, if you have all those generations back, that in a way that is something to be proud of, and it’s not something that you’d feel in any way embarrassed about.

Chris: And you can see the value of those ties, and the strengthening of the culture, but do you think in some ways there’s a negative side to thinking of it that way?

Charlie: There can be. I think when people take that perhaps a bit too far, when it feels like if somebody doesn’t have that background, if someone doesn’t have that history then in some way they’re lesser than another person, I think that is the negative side. I can definitely see where the perception comes from of, of the …

Chris: … the closed community.

Charlie: Yeah, I mean I think within, you know, people perceiving that hierarchy as being of value, I can understand that point of view, but I think where it could become negative is if somebody is just deaf on their own, they’ve got no family history of deafness

Chris: sure

Charlie: but they may still have a tremendous amount to offer, and if they feel like they’re not of as much value … … but I think that’s fairly rare really.
Chris: How're telephones – you use the telephone don’t you – is the telephone a contentious instrument and a … almost a dividing instrument within the deaf community?

Charlie: The telephone was more of a dividing instrument fifteen, twenty years ago. I think with the rise of the internet, nowadays deaf people can email companies, you can text people …

Chris: text must make a massive difference

Charlie: Texting has made a massive difference. I mean previously, I used to read stories about deaf people who would write letters to each other to say: “I’ll meet you at the pub a week on Friday”, [laughs] and they would go to that pub and hope …

Chris: that the letter had got there!

Charlie: … that the person had got it and they would be there. And that was the reality of the deaf world. People in the deaf world who are older will tell you that they waited two hours for somebody, when they went somewhere, because they didn’t know if they were late, they didn’t know if they weren’t coming, and you know … but nowadays that’s unthinkable, nowadays you’d send a text and you’d find out very quickly what was happening. I think email and text have made a massive difference to the deaf community.

Chris: Charlie Swinbourne. And that’s it for this edition of Word of Mouth, I hope you can join us at the same time next week. Goodbye.

END

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