

The Endangered Language Initiative
presents a special lecture by

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***Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language:
Kernels of Phonology in a New Sign Language***

The property of duality of patterning – the existence of a meaningful level of words and sentences alongside a meaningless level of sounds – has been characterized as a basic design feature of human language (Hockett 1960). Some have also argued that phonology must have existed prior to syntactic structure in the evolution of language (Pinker & Jackendoff 2005). Sign languages were admitted to the ‘bona fide language club’ only after Stokoe (1960) demonstrated that they do exhibit duality. But is it possible for a conventionalized language to exist without a fully developed phonological system – without duality? Using evidence from a sign language that has emerged over the past 75 years in a small, insular community, I will show that phonology cannot be taken for granted. The Al-Sayyid Bedouins have a conventionalized language with certain syntactic and morphological regularities (Sandler et al 2005, Aronoff et al 2008), but the language is apparently still in the process of developing a level of structure with discrete meaningless units that behave systematically. In other words, we don’t find evidence for a full-blown phonological system in this language. Can a language go on like this? Data from children and from families with several deaf people help to pinpoint emerging regularities and complexity at the level of meaningless formational elements in ABSL. While phonology in language cannot be taken for granted, then, its existence in all older languages, spoken and signed, demonstrates that it is inevitable. Rather than assume that phonology is somehow ‘given’ or hard-wired, this work leads us to ask, Why and how does it arise?

31 January 2011
4:30pm-6:30pm, room 9204
All welcome!

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