



Terminology Used to Refer to Deaf People

A long time ago it was acceptable to refer to a deaf person as “deaf-and-dumb.” Many institutions that shouldered the responsibility for caring and educating deaf children were called “Institution for the Deaf and Dumb.” The term, “dumb,” did not mean that the person was stupid or low in intelligence; rather it was a reference to the inability of many deaf children and adults to speak. Not being able to speak gave rise to another common term: “deaf-mute.”

“Dummy” was another expression used to denote a Deaf person. William Ellsworth (1862-1961), known as “Dummy Hoy,” was a deaf baseball pitcher who helped umpires develop hand signals to inform the pitcher of the count at the plate and whether a runner was safe or out at a base. Luther Haden (1875-1958), another deaf baseball player who enjoyed a 21-15 season for the 1904 New York Giants, was called “Dummy Taylor.” “Dummy” was also the moniker for a deaf African American man charged with the murder of a prostitute in Chicago in the early 1960s. Because these men were deaf, the media affixed the term, “Dummy,” to their names, all because these deaf men could not speak. In these days being called “Dummy,” “deaf-and-dumb,” or “deaf-mute” carried no stigma or shame.

Today the terms, “deaf-and-dumb” and “Dummy” have fallen out of favor. The reference to “dumbness” nowadays carries a negative connotation: the person so labeled is considered lacking in intelligence. The Deaf community takes offense at this term, and it is no longer used in books, movies, schools, the workplace and other public sites. However, the term, “deaf-mute,” has proved to be more resilient. It still retains a place in many English language dictionaries. Many newspaper articles use it in referring to deaf people. It pops up in colloquial conversations around the country. Until a few years ago the leading law dictionary used by thousands of law students and professors listed the term so that when a lawyer looked up the word, “Deaf,” his or her assumption that Deaf people cannot speak was reinforced.

The truth of the matter is, many Deaf people can speak or vocalize intelligibly enough to be understood by a hearing person. Speech training is available for many deaf children in the public schools as well as the residential schools for the deaf. Ninety percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents, and many of these children are raised under the oral method, which stresses speech training and lip-reading practice. Many acquire the ability to speak intelligibly. By no stretch of the imagination can these children and adults be termed, “mute.”

The most appropriate term, and the simplest, is “deaf” or “Deaf.” The former refers to a deaf person who regards himself as a person with a medical condition, while the latter refers to a Deaf person who identifies with a larger community of Deaf people and a Deaf culture. As many Deaf people view it, the former term retains a medical flavor, and the latter term reflects a political consciousness of their place in the larger community. Another appropriate term for some people is “hard-of-hearing,” which refers to people who are not totally deaf but have residual hearing in one or both ears, enough to hear sounds, listen to music and speak over the telephone. Many hard-of-hearing people do not consider themselves part of the Deaf community.

Michael Schwartz

©Syracuse University, 2002. All rights reserved.