

# A New Language—of Silence

Until the late 1970s, deaf Nicaraguan children had few resources available to them. They stayed at home and communicated using crude signs. Even when schools were started for them, the teaching methods used were slow and largely ineffective. However, when about fifty deaf children came together, something amazing happened: They started to develop their own language—Nicaraguan Sign Language (NSL).

(1) To scientists, this event was *momentous*, for it proved that children, even those who have not been exposed to language, have the ability to create it.

(2) The factor that seems to be *indispensable* for language development is having a community of speakers. (3) The ability to hear language, however, is *inconsequential*, for these children developed a silent language.

The first “speakers” of NSL used relatively simple signs. “To talk” was expressed by opening and closing the thumb and index finger in front of one’s mouth. Soon, however, the signs became more subtle. The place where one’s fingers opened and closed began to communicate past, present, or future verb tense. Directions, such as up or down, became distinguished from actions, like rolling or walking. For example, *Roll, down, roll* means “to roll down,” but *roll down* means “to roll and then go down.”

As more deaf children came of school age, the community of language users grew. (4) In a *noteworthy* development, people found that younger children used more complex language forms. This was partially because they were refining the first inventions and partially because younger children are more flexible as they learn—and create—language.

(5) *Superficially*, NSL can look like random hand movements. (6) However, its “speakers” can communicate messages that are *indubitably* complex. An article in the *New York Times* reported one child signing, “I live with my grandmother. It’s way over there in the barrio. We sit around, and we’re bored all the time. We do a lot of laundry. But at school, everyone’s deaf, so I can talk to them. And I can read a book about Babar.”

(7) When staff members at the Nicaraguan school first realized what was happening, they called in *eminent* scholars to investigate the language. (8) Realizing the importance of what they had seen, these linguists published articles about NSL in *prestigious* journals.

Now the language has become the object of research. Some scholars want to protect the new language by not teaching the children a more standard form of communication, such as American Sign Language.

(9) To others, this seems *petty*, or even unethical.

(10) They believe *paramount* concern should be the best interests of the children.

Whatever NSL’s eventual fate, it remains the miraculous invention of a few impaired individuals. It is not surprising that the world’s newest language was created by the world’s most linguistically inventive people—children!



Each sentence below refers to a numbered sentence in the passage. Write the letter of the choice that gives the sentence a meaning that is closest to the original sentence.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. To scientists, this event was \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. beautiful                      b. necessary                      c. significant                      d. unimportant
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The factor that seems to be \_\_\_\_\_ for language development is having a community of speakers.
- a. intelligent                      b. lacking                      c. unquestionable                      d. required
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The ability to hear language, however, is \_\_\_\_\_.
- a. not important                      b. absolutely crucial                      c. on the surface                      d. impossible
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. In a \_\_\_\_\_ development, people found that younger children used more complex language forms.
- a. high-status                      b. recent                      c. respected                      d. deserving attention

- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. \_\_\_\_\_, NSL can look like random hand movements.  
 a. Frequently      b. At first      c. On the surface      d. Unquestionably
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. However, its "speakers" can communicate messages that are \_\_\_\_\_ complex.  
 a. considered      b. unquestionably      c. essentially      d. hardly
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. When staff members at the Nicaraguan school first realized what was happening, they called in \_\_\_\_\_ scholars to investigate the language.  
 a. numerous      b. famous      c. unimportant      d. intelligent
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Realizing the importance of what they had seen, these linguists published articles about NSL in \_\_\_\_\_ journals.  
 a. respected      b. scientific      c. insignificant      d. numerous
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. To others, this seems \_\_\_\_\_, or even unethical.  
 a. trivial      b. unquestionable      c. irresponsible      d. wrong
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. They believe the \_\_\_\_\_ concern should be the best interests of the children.  
 a. without a doubt      b. most noticeable      c. most important      d. near the surface

Indicate whether the statements below are TRUE or FALSE according to the passage.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. NSL was developed by linguists at a university in Nicaragua.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The development of NSL proves that children don't have to hear language to be able to create it.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Some scholars think the children shouldn't be taught conventional sign language.

## WRITE THE DERIVATIVE

Complete the sentence by writing the correct form of the word shown in parentheses. You may not need to change the form that is given.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The \_\_\_\_\_ artist received many requests to paint portraits. (*eminence*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The fact that she forgot to put pepper in the stew was \_\_\_\_\_. (*inconsequential*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The \_\_\_\_\_ argument between the five-year-olds was soon over. (*pettiness*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Brushing your teeth is \_\_\_\_\_ to keeping them healthy. (*paramount*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The \_\_\_\_\_ of our new neighbor's friendliness was apparent to us all. (*superficial*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Many \_\_\_\_\_ athletes attended the pitcher's induction into the hall of fame. (*noteworthy*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Kevin's announcement added to the \_\_\_\_\_ of the occasion. (*momentous*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. A giraffe's neck is \_\_\_\_\_ long. (*indubitably*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Finding his pockets empty, Tom thought about the \_\_\_\_\_ of money. (*indispensable*)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Liam's parents were so proud when he won the \_\_\_\_\_ state chess championship! (*prestige*)