

**Links: [Soundcloud playlist – Dr Bencie Woll Interview 4 Sep 2025](#)**

**56:15 – 1:06:22 (interviewed by Imam Jalees Khan, Zakaria Bhatti & Imam Noor Hadi)**

Welcome back to the Thursday's Breakfast Show. May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon you all.

We are talking about empowering the deaf. We are talking about sign language. And someone who can share light upon this topic it's our guests of the time. We've got Dr Bencie Woll with us. May the peace and blessings of Allah be upon you Dr Bencie.

How are you doing this morning?

Very well thank you.

A real pleasure of having you on the show.

For the benefit of our listeners Dr Bencie Woll is a leading scholar of Sign Language and Deaf Studies. Trained as a linguist in the US and the UK, she has spent over 40 years pioneering research on British Sign Language and the experiences of Deaf people. She co-founded the Centre for Deaf Studies at Bristol and later the Deafness Cognition and Language Research Centre at UCL, where she was professor until her retirement in 2019. Her work has covered everything from the linguistics and history of BSL, to how deaf children acquire language, to the relationship between sign language and the brain. She has published widely, co-authoring key books that have shaped the field. Dr Woll's contributions have been recognised with election to the British Academy and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and in 2024 she was awarded an MBE for services to higher education and the Deaf community.

As I mentioned before Dr Woll, a real pleasure to have you on our show.

Again, we're talking about sign language and comparing the deaf.

How did sign languages come into existence? Is there any relationship between sign language and spoken language?

[inaudible]...

**[continue from timestamp: 59:30]**

So, to say sign languages are independent languages. They are not related to the spoken languages around them. And they have always existed wherever there have been deaf people interacting with each other.

For example, descriptions of British Sign Language go back to the 15 hundreds [wow] and the references from even before that to deaf people using signing to communicate.

Wow, that's amazing. Absolute amazing stuff.

Is there one universal sign language and how do signers communicate with signers from other countries?

So, there are many different sign languages just as there are many different spoken languages. But just as with spoken languages they are families of sign languages, so they are related to each other for historical reasons.

So, for example, British sign language and Australian sign language. On the other hand, American sign language is not related to British sign language. It's related for historical reasons to French sign language. [Okay].

There's one Indo-Pakistani sign language with many different dialects. [Wow]

But I should also add that deaf people are actually the world's greatest communicators because they have access to visual communication. Fluent signers are not only able to but really happy to interact with signers who use other sign languages.

There is a sense in which the deaf community is an international community. And deaf people who go anywhere in the world feel they can meet up with other deaf people they have met you know their brothers and sisters.

Absolute amazing. Absolute amazing.

So, in terms of other signers communicating with other countries how would that work. Will there be some sort of similar kind of key signs that they might look for?

I think it's more of a case of using two things. One is that of course you can, not use sign language. But if you're thinking visually, think of ways to gesture and to work with hand concepts. And the other thing is that the way you organise grammar in sign language. And how you communicate uses a lot of grammar based on visual relationship. So, if you want to compare things you might sign something on one hand and the contrast on the other hand. And that used to be something that all humans can do.

So deaf people are really adapted to drawing on that because they spend so much of their life communicating with people who don't know sign language, and they use other visual ways of communicating.

Yes, thank you for that Dr Woll.

It still feels as though deafness is not given some prominence as other disabilities. Why do you think this is the case and what steps can be taken to increase awareness in society?

So, I think there's generally a lack of deaf awareness and that because deafness is an invisible disability. When you look at people with other disability you can see this disability.

Deaf only make itself known when communicating. Deaf people can navigate the world you know, perfectly well. What they have problems with of course is communicating with the world.

So, I think there's a general lack of awareness. And there's also a kind of a failure for people you know, we often think just you know lip reading you can solve all deaf people problems. They just have to watch your face. But of course, it's more complex than that.

So, I think there's the lack of awareness. Is paradoxically means that deaf people don't get the recognition that they need either in a positive sense or in a sense of what needs to be done to make communication accessible.

Do you feel that sign language should be part of the school curriculum and how would this empower not only deaf individuals but also those who are not deaf?

Okay. So, many people are not aware that sign language not part of the curriculum for all deaf learners either. I mean deaf children. 85% in mainstream schools and they may not get any exposure to a sign language.

The government is rolling out a new GCSE to include sign language which I think will have really amazing effect. It's going to increase deaf awareness and it's going to improve communications between deaf and hearing children and adults in the end.

And that will help with issues like the shortages of interpreters. And it's also beneficial in terms of language learning generally for the hearing learners who will do their GCSE. And there will obviously be a majority of children doing that will be hearing.

Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely.

What does the future hold for sign languages, and how can they play an even more significant role in promoting inclusion as well as accessibility?

So, I think there's two contrasting aspects. So, over recent years there's become much greater awareness of deaf people. There's much greater visibility of sign language in public places and on media.

There's new technology coming out. AI for sign language processing. Automated translation. Ways of deaf people interacting with computers.

All of these things I think are very exciting developments. On the other hand, there's still this issue of language deprivation of continuing poor educational achievement of deaf children not just in the UK but certainly internationally.

There's a social stigma in families that have deaf members. And that needs to be addressed through greater awareness and inclusion.

So, I think the future actually is very bright for sign languages but there's a lot of things we need to do to make that future come true.

Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely amazing stuff Dr Woll.

Once again, a real pleasure having you on the show and may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon you.

Thank you very much.