

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CXXX, Number 102, 20 October 2006 — Letters to the Editor [ARTICLE]

Letters to the Editor

ASL Is a Language With a Unique Grammatical Structure and Syntax

To the Editor:

While your staff editorial supporting the institution of American Sign Language (“ASL 101,” Oct. 16) is, of course, much appreciated, your perpetuation of a common misconception about American Sign Language is not.

Learning ASL does, in fact, require learning a new grammatical structure. ASL does not share syntax with English—the language actually has a grammatical structure similar to French. ASL was developed jointly by Laurent Clerc, a French teacher of the deaf, and Thomas Gallaudet, an American deaf educator who aimed to emulate the Old French Sign Language that had been prevalent in France since the 18th century. They wanted to create an American equivalent. Thus ASL, unlike English, features a subject-object-verb word order. Within a noun phrase, the adjective follows the noun. For example, used in a sentence: “The absence of ASL language courses at Columbia is an injustice deplorable.”

Additional characteristics solidly distinguish ASL from English. ASL is a pronoun-dropping language; English is not. ASL has no copulas—English is replete with the linking verb ‘to be.’ Time-sequenced ordering of events is necessary in ASL; in English this rule need not be followed.

In 1960, Dr. William Stokoe’s linguistic study *Sign Language Structure* sparked a social and intellectual revolution. Stokoe’s work was pivotal in the acceptance of ASL not as a simplified or augmented version of English, but as a language in its own right. Stokoe is touted as the second father of ASL, a liberator who halted the oppressive tradition of oralism in deaf education. He replaced it with the long-averted practice of manualism and a subsequent widely recognized deaf-centric language.

However, with regard to ASL, the Columbia administration seems to be lingering almost a half-century behind the scientific and cultural mainstream. ASL is not an English-dependent language—it maintains its own culture, grammar, and subsequent avenues of study.

Ross Johnson, CC '10
Oct. 17, 2006

Blood Donor Policy Has Its Origins In
the FDA, Cannot Be Easily Altered

To the Editor:

I was very pleased to see the editorial about the recent blood drive held on campus by Columbia ("Clean Blood," Oct. 18) and the support that was expressed for this important activity. I also want to thank you for taking time to outline your concerns relative to the policy prohibiting blood donations from men who have sex with men. I do wish to clarify a couple of points. This policy is not the New York Blood Center's. It is part of mandated guidelines from the Food and Drug Administration, which licenses all U.S. blood centers. The New York Blood Center is required to follow these guidelines to screen blood donors. Many blood centers, including the New York Blood Center, have periodically questioned the FDA concerning these guidelines, including whether or not there is sufficient scientific evidence to support them. As recently as this past March at an FDA conference regarding the homosexual deferral, the New York Blood Center expressed opposition to the current deferral criteria. However, unless and until FDA changes the guideline, as an FDA-licensed institution, the New York Blood Center must comply.

You state in your editorial that the story of risk for homosexuals is different these days and that the rate of women getting infected is higher than homosexuals. However, men who have sex with men are still the highest group of new HIV infections. In fact, in 2004 the number of new HIV cases in men between the ages of 15 and 29 increased over the pre-

vious three years. It would be unrealistic and dangerous to say young gay men are not at risk. I think the college newspaper should not give your readership false reassurance and remember that not all homosexuals are as knowledgeable and plugged in to the need to get tested as Columbia students and faculty may be. You merely have to read the AIDS literature to know that most HIV-infected persons do not know their status. All people need to protect themselves. You can find statistics at cdc.gov.

Another important clarification I need to make is that while it is true that all donated blood is tested, there is a "window period" during which the tests are not able to detect HIV infection. This window period is the 11- to 22-day period after a person becomes infected with HIV. Blood given during this period is able to transmit the HIV infection to others but will not test positive. Though this is an exceedingly rare occurrence, it is still necessary to question prospective donors about risk in an effort prevent window period donations.

I was pleased to participate in the discussion session organized by the University, where a lively and very productive discussion took place. During a prior blood drive, the students organized a petition that the New York Blood Center forwarded to the FDA with a letter of support. These kinds of actions will, albeit slowly, move the process toward change. We commit ourselves to continuing to work independently and together with you on pushing forward on this matter. My thanks to the Columbia community for their commitment to supporting the blood needs of New York.

Debra Kessler, registered nurse and M.S.

Oct. 18, 2006

*The author is the director of regional services at
the New York Blood Center.*

LGBT Groups Create Community, Should Also Focus on National Issues

To the Editor:

A military colleague of mine and Columbia graduate recently asked me to comment on Chuck Griffith's article ("Out and Proud at Columbia," Oct. 16). Griffith should be applauded for his suggestions, and it is wonderful to see that he has indeed found a home at Columbia. It is true that the LGBT groups could and should do more to establish and promote themselves—not only at Columbia, but throughout the country. I know a number of LGBT members in the military, and many, like Chuck, do not meet stereotypical expectations. But all are proud of the Armed Forces and proud of their service.

I hope that the Queer Alliance and other LGBT groups will take the initiative to address not only University issues but also national concerns, such as Congress' persecution of homosexual members of the Armed Forces through its "don't ask, don't tell" policy, or the courageous and heroic work LGBT members are doing in service abroad.

With their numbers and power to organize, the Queer Alliance and its supporters have the opportunity to truly make a mark and affect change on a national scale.

Sean Wilkes, CC '06

Oct. 17, 2006

Extremist Views of Religious Sites Make Dialogue Difficult to Balance

To the Editor:

Typically, not one word about the 1929 massacre or about the history of the old Jewish community in Hebron, its oppression under Muslim rule, and the series of pogroms that were carried out against Jews over the ages was mentioned by Suneela Mubayi ("Hebron's Nasty Neighbors," Oct. 13). For Mubayi, a senior majoring in Middle East studies

and a human rights volunteer in Hebron this past summer who gave her readers a short survey of Hebron's past, the history of the Tomb of the Patriarchs began only with the rise of Islam. Mubayi does not only ignore the Jewish, pre-Islamic period in the town's history. When talking about Arabs, she is also careful to avoid the word "conquest." According to her, Islam simply "came to Palestine" (gently and gingerly, I presume). In contrast, words like "occupation" and "expropriation" are reserved by her only to describe Israel's actions.

In addition, while before 1967 Jews were never allowed to worship inside the tomb, in claiming that

“devotees of all three Semitic religions ... came to worship,” Mubayi attempts to give the false impression that under Muslim rule all three religions had equal footing in the holy tomb. Furthermore, while Mubayi ignores the 1929 massacre of the Jews, she seems quite eager to remind her readers of the 1994 act by a deranged Israeli Jew who killed innocent Muslim worshipers near the tomb, as if this appalling murder has been the only and major atrocity that took place there ever since. After trying to arouse empathy in her readers for the Arab victims of this sad incident, Mubayi describes the Israeli soldiers’ search for hiding terrorists in Arab homes as being as illegitimate as Goldstein’s act. This is not surprising, given the fact that members of some human rights organizations often do not believe that an act aimed at preventing one from being killed by terrorists is also a basic human right, especially when Israeli Jews are the victimized party.

Let me clarify: I do not bring up all this to support or to justify any ugly treatment of innocent Arab residents in Hebron by some fanatic individuals among the current Jewish residents of the town. Unfortunately, holy places breed fanatics on both sides. What bothers and pains me is that the Middle East and Asian languages and cultures department produces majors who in their senior year are still so ignorant of the complex history of the region and so unaware of their pitiful ignorance and bias that they are not ashamed to write and publish pure garbage in the paper and sign their names next to it.

Dr. Ruth Raphaeli-Slivko

Oct. 17, 2006

The author is a senior lecturer in the Hebrew language department of the Middle East and Asian languages and cultures department.

Shany Mor Deserves a Fair Hearing and Justice From the University

To the Editor:

The behavior of the Columbia administration in Shany Mor’s case has been shameful and potentially damaging to the University’s wider reputation and ability to attract and retain quality graduate students in the future. Why would anyone looking to start an academic career choose to do so at a University where the administration can’t be trusted to act impartially when dealing complaints from graduate students?

As a member of the Columbia University community and a friend of Mor, I am entitled to expect that a purportedly fair and objective grievance procedure is in fact fair and objective. The existence of an impartial grievance procedure ensures that the climate of academic freedom that the University thrives on is maintained. That some members of the University administration have, instead of ensuring the integrity of the grievance procedure, resorted to the use of what amounts to siege tactics is unacceptable. Whether these actions were the result of bias or simple incompetence is unimportant. Mor has a

of simple incompetence is unimportant. IUI has a right to a fair hearing and the University community deserves a grievance procedure that is worthy of the name.

Jesse Wilkins, GSAS
Oct. 18, 2006