

ORALISM

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1. Core Definition

Oralism, often synonymously referred to as the **Oral Method**, is a historically dominant pedagogical approach aimed at teaching communication skills to individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. The fundamental premise of Oralism centers on the utilization of spoken language as the exclusive or overwhelmingly preferred mode of communication, actively suppressing or entirely forbidding the use of sign language and other manual forms of correspondence within educational settings. This philosophy is rooted in the belief that proficiency in spoken language and lip-reading--skills common in the hearing majority--is the crucial prerequisite for social integration, academic success, and overall participation in society. Oralism seeks to bridge the communication gap primarily through intensive auditory-verbal training and visual cue interpretation, thereby positioning deafness as a deficiency requiring remediation rather than a difference requiring alternative linguistic accommodation.

The practical application of Oralism demands highly specialized instruction focusing on several key areas. These include the rigorous development of **residual hearing** through the use of amplification technologies (such as hearing aids or cochlear implants), meticulous training in **speech reading** (or lip-reading), and dedicated practice in articulation and voice modulation to produce intelligible spoken output. For generations, adherence to Oralist principles meant that students in specialized schools were penalized for using gestures or natural sign systems, leading to a pervasive cultural tension between the educational establishment and the emerging Deaf culture, which prioritized visual and manual languages like American Sign Language (ASL). The definition of Oralism, therefore, extends beyond mere technique; it embodies a philosophical stance on the nature of disability and assimilation.

While modern advancements have led to variations such as Auditory-Verbal Therapy (AVT) and Auditory-Oral approaches, the historical concept of **pure Oralism** represented an educational environment where the hands were strictly tied and the focus was singularly on forcing speech production and reception. This methodology stands in direct opposition to Manualism, the earlier tradition which advocated for the primary use of sign language, epitomized by historical figures like Abbé de l'Épée. Understanding Oralism requires recognizing its foundational goal: to render deaf individuals linguistically and socially indistinguishable from their hearing peers, an objective that often came at the expense of natural linguistic development and cultural identity formation.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The roots of Oralism can be traced back to the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods in Europe, though it gained significant momentum in the 18th and 19th centuries. Early proponents were often physicians or educators who believed that the ability to speak was inextricably linked to intelligence and human dignity, a view influenced by classical philosophy that often equated speechlessness with intellectual incapacity. Key early figures, such as Samuel Heinicke in Germany and Thomas Braidwood in Great Britain, established schools focusing on methods of teaching articulation and lip-reading, demonstrating that deaf individuals could indeed learn to speak, even if imperfectly. This early success set the stage for Oralism's eventual global dominance, positioning it as the more "progressive" and "integrative" alternative to the sign-based methods (Manualism) pioneered in France and later brought to the United States.

The turning point for the global adoption of Oralism occurred at the **Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf**, famously known as the Milan Conference of 1880. This event is perhaps the single most significant and controversial moment in the history of Deaf education. During this conference, a declaration was passed by a majority of hearing educators, effectively endorsing Oralism as superior to Manualism for teaching the deaf. This resolution declared that "the unchangeable superiority of speech over signs" was established, and recommended the use of the oral method in all institutions. The consequences were immediate and devastating for the Manualist movement and the nascent Deaf community culture. Within decades following the Milan Conference, nearly all schools for the deaf in Europe and the Americas shifted their curricula to prioritize or exclusively mandate the Oral Method, leading to the dismissal of deaf teachers who relied on sign language.

In the United States, prominent figures such as **Alexander Graham Bell** became fierce advocates for Oralism. Bell, who had a deaf mother and wife, genuinely believed that sign language created a societal segregation and argued passionately for the eradication of signing through education, viewing it as a barrier to assimilation. His influence, combined with the momentum from the Milan Conference, solidified Oralism's position as the dominant pedagogical philosophy throughout the first half of the 20th century. This historical period is characterized by the systematic suppression of indigenous sign languages and the forced adoption of speech training, resulting in a profound loss of linguistic heritage and autonomy for multiple generations of deaf students. The history of Oralism is thus inextricably linked to assimilationist social policies and educational mandates.

3. Key Characteristics (The Oral Method)

The Oral Method is defined by specific instructional techniques designed to achieve communication competence without recourse to manual communication. Its defining characteristic is the strict exclusion of sign language, requiring students to rely solely on auditory and visual cues

for input, and on articulation for output. This prohibition was enforced rigorously, often through punitive measures, to ensure students did not develop fluency in a language deemed detrimental to their social future. This foundational characteristic distinguishes pure Oralism from later, more integrated methodologies.

A second core characteristic is **Speech Reading (Lip-Reading)**. This involves training the deaf individual to interpret the movements of the speaker's lips, tongue, and jaw to understand spoken language. This skill is notoriously difficult to master, as many phonemes (speech sounds) are visually ambiguous (e.g., 'p', 'b', and 'm' often look identical on the lips). Success in lip-reading is highly dependent on factors like lighting, distance, the speaker's clarity, and prior linguistic knowledge, leading to inherent communication gaps and high cognitive load for the student. Despite these limitations, the mastery of lip-reading was historically held up as the primary metric of success within Oralist schools.

Thirdly, Oralism emphasizes intensive **Auditory Training** and the utilization of **residual hearing**. This aspect involves training students to recognize and differentiate sounds using hearing aids or other amplification devices, even if their hearing loss is severe. The goal is to maximize any usable auditory input to support speech development and comprehension. In conjunction with auditory training is rigorous **Articulation Training**, where teachers employ specialized techniques--often involving tactile feedback, mirrors, and repetitive exercises--to teach the mechanics of sound production, breath control, and voice pitch, striving for clear, natural-sounding speech. These characteristics combine to form an instructional environment focused on compensatory skills that mimic hearing communication modalities.

4. Underlying Philosophy and Goals

The fundamental philosophy underpinning Oralism is rooted in a medical-pathological view of deafness. Proponents viewed deafness not as a natural human variance or a linguistic minority status, but as a disability or defect that must be overcome for the individual's well-being. The primary goal was **assimilation**: to prepare deaf individuals to function seamlessly within the dominant hearing society, believing that speech was the indispensable key to social acceptance and economic opportunity. This assimilationist approach sought to minimize the perceived differences between deaf and hearing individuals.

A significant philosophical driver was the belief that **speech equates to intellectual superiority**. For many historical Oralists, the absence of spoken language implied a lesser degree of cognitive function or an inability to grasp abstract thought, a notion that modern linguistic science has decisively refuted. By prioritizing speech, educators aimed to unlock full cognitive potential, erroneously linking linguistic modality (spoken vs. signed) with intellectual capacity itself. This ideology justified the stringent prohibition of sign language, which was often dismissed as a

primitive form of communication that would hinder the development of sophisticated thought processes required for literacy and higher education.

Furthermore, Oralism was frequently championed by parents of deaf children who desired normalization and feared the social isolation associated with signing communities. These parental anxieties, combined with the persuasive arguments of powerful educators like Bell, lent social legitimacy to the movement. The goal was often altruistic--to give the child "every advantage"--but the methods employed often ignored the natural, visual language acquisition process, leading to the paradox where the pursuit of communication ability resulted in linguistic barriers and, in many cases, **linguistic deprivation** for students who failed to master the extremely difficult skills of lip-reading and clear articulation. The philosophy was integrationist, but the execution was often linguistically suppressive.

5. Significance and Impact

The impact of Oralism on global Deaf education is profound and enduring, marking a period often described by the Deaf community as a cultural dark age. Following the Milan Conference of 1880, Oralism became the globally accepted norm, leading to the widespread closure or conversion of schools that historically employed Manualism. The most significant consequence was the massive reduction in the number of deaf teachers and administrators in deaf schools, as many were fluent only in sign language and deemed unqualified to teach the new oral curriculum. This shift fundamentally altered the cultural environment of deaf schools, replacing deaf role models with hearing educators often unfamiliar with the nuances of Deaf experience or American Sign Language (ASL).

Academically, the legacy of pure Oralism is highly controversial. While a small percentage of deaf and hard-of-hearing students achieved functional fluency in spoken language and lip-reading, a large majority failed to acquire meaningful communication skills in the early, critical stages of language development. This widespread educational failure resulted in generations of deaf adults with poor literacy rates, underdeveloped language skills (known as language delay or linguistic deprivation), and significant gaps in world knowledge, as they struggled to access information delivered solely through speech and lip-reading. The forced removal of their natural visual language created an educational bottleneck that hampered cognitive development for decades.

Culturally, Oralism fostered a deep resentment within the Deaf community. The suppression of sign language was viewed as an act of cultural cultural genocide, attempting to erase a minority identity and language. However, the movement also inadvertently strengthened the bonds of Deaf culture. Students, often banned from signing in classrooms, would covertly sign in dormitories and playgrounds, ensuring the survival and evolution of sign languages. The lasting significance of Oralism lies in its role as the catalyst for modern debates over language rights, communication

modalities, and the recognition of sign languages as full, complex, and vital linguistic systems. Its history serves as a cautionary tale regarding assimilationist policies in disability education.

6. Debates and Criticisms

The most substantial criticism leveled against Oralism stems from its consistent, widespread failure to provide effective communication and language access for the majority of deaf students, particularly those with profound hearing loss. Research has overwhelmingly demonstrated that the reliance on lip-reading--a skill achieved successfully by only a fraction of students--and poor-quality auditory input resulted in significant educational underachievement compared to students educated using manual or bilingual methods. Critics argue that the prioritization of speech over genuine language acquisition led to years of lost learning time during critical developmental periods.

Furthermore, the Deaf community fundamentally critiques Oralism on **human rights and cultural grounds**. Forcing deaf children to abandon their natural language (sign language) to adopt a difficult, often unsuccessful method (speech) is seen as an act of linguistic oppression. Critics point out that the focus on "fixing" deafness ignores the cultural reality that deaf people form a linguistic minority with a vibrant culture. The methodology's focus on assimilation demands that deaf individuals perform extra work to communicate on hearing terms, rather than accommodating their linguistic needs through accessible methods.

The rise of competing methodologies--specifically **Total Communication** in the late 20th century, which advocates for using all means necessary (signing, speech, writing, lip-reading) simultaneously--was a direct response to the documented failures of pure Oralism. Even today, highly specialized forms of Oralism, such as Auditory-Verbal Therapy, remain popular, often supported by advances in cochlear implant technology. However, contemporary educational standards increasingly favor bilingual-bicultural approaches (teaching both the local sign language and the spoken/written majority language), recognizing that full, early language acquisition in any modality is paramount for cognitive health, thereby mitigating the historical damage inflicted by stringent Oralist mandates.

7. Further Reading

[The Milan Conference of 1880 \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Manualism and its Opposition to Oralism \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Deaf Culture and Linguistic Identity \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[The Nature and Status of Sign Language \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Cultural Genocide as Applied to Linguistic Suppression \(Wikipedia\)](#)