

## INTRODUCING A DEAF-BLIND SPEECH RESEARCHER

by Hendrik Mol

Dr. Gerrit van der Mey is a deaf-blind mathematician specialized in computer programming who works at the Technical University of Delft, The Netherlands. He became blind at the age of five; in addition, he suddenly became totally deaf when he was thirty-one years old. When I first met him some thirty years ago he was already deaf and blind. I undertook to construct and improve devices that would allow him to communicate more freely with his fellow-men.\* One of these devices consisted of a keyboard (typewriter style) on which people could type out their messages for Dr. van der Mey who received them through his finger tip on a specially constructed Braille reading-box. Because Gerrit van der Mey had retained an almost perfect speech he could answer normally. He only had, as it were, a mechanical ear at his finger tips. It proved to be possible to operate the reading-box via a telephone circuit. Later on the devices were perfected and extended by his chief Dr. W.L. van der Poel.\*\*

After he had attended the 'Helen Keller Conference on

\* H. Mol, Conversation with the Deaf and Blind, Het PTT-Bedrijf, 1954, Deel VI, 1.

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Services to deaf-blind Youths and Adults' in New York (1977), Dr. van der Mey was urged from several sides to put down in writing his ideas on severe deafness and its combating and at the same time to explain how he had managed to maintain such a good voice. As very few people in this world read Dutch, Gerrit van der Mey decided to write his report in the foreign language he has mastered best: German. In order to make it accessible to a still wider public, however, I volunteered to translate his paper into English so that it could be published in our Proceedings.

As a matter of fact Dr. van der Mey and I have started an investigation into the backgrounds of the astonishingly good quality of his speech despite his long-standing total deafness of over thirty-three years by now. We aim to report on our results regularly in the Proceedings. The advantage of having Dr. van der Mey as a subject for experiment lies in the fact that he is able to separate completely the messages produced by the organ of hearing (these messages being totally absent in his case) from the factors governing the act of speaking. Therefore his cooperation in researches after the real nature of articulation and perception is invaluable.

It is highly important to emphasize here that Dr. van der Mey never consulted a list of keywords before in his life. Just for the purpose of writing this report he sat down and composed such a list for the German language. I asked him why he had made a difference between, for instance, initial [n] and final [n]. His answer was that he 'felt' doing two distinctly different things with his articulatory organs when pronouncing initial [n] or final [n]. Following the alphabetic tradition he indicated these two actions by the same letter N. The reader will no doubt notice that Dr. van der Mey cannot use the traditional

phonetic symbols because the Braille-code does not permit him to do so. In my opinion Dr. van der Mey's list does not compare unfavourably with the way phonetics is treated in many contemporary textbooks on grammar.

As anyone who did a little translating in his time knows, a really satisfactory translation remains an illusion. However, the least one can do is try as well as (im)-possible.