

There are different sign languages all over the world, just as there are different spoken languages. ASL and British Sign Language are different, mutually unintelligible languages. Because the American and British Deaf communities were not in contact with each other, the two languages developed independently. French Sign Language, Danish Sign Language, Taiwan Sign Language, Australian Sign Language, Thai Sign Language, Finnish Sign Language, Brazilian Sign Language, and many others have developed in communities of Deaf people, just as spoken languages have developed in communities of hearing people. Each displays the kinds of structural differences from the country's spoken language that show it to be a language in its own right.

The discovery that sign languages are languages in their own right has led to the blossoming of literary culture in sign. With a new sense of pride in their language and culture, and rooted in Deaf people's strong story-telling tradition, a new generation of Deaf writers, playwrights, and poets has begun to explore the ways sign languages can be used to create works of art. They have produced literary works in sign languages—stories, plays, and poetry—performed and disseminated on videotape.

What has been discovered over the past half century is that sign language is language. This is not just a discovery about sign language; it is a discovery about language itself. It reveals human language to be more flexible than had been imagined, able to exist in either auditory or visual form. It shows that the human drive for language is so strong that when deafness makes speech inaccessible, it finds another channel, creating language in sign. Sign language has taught us that human language can use either channel—speech or sign. It is a living testament to the fact that language is what we all need to be human.

References

Padden, Carol A. and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America*, Harvard University Press, 1988.

Sacks, Oliver, *Seeing Voices*, University of California Press, 1989. Paperback published by Harper/Collins.

Perlmutter, David M. "The Language of the Deaf." *New York Review of Books*, March 28, 1991, pp. 65-72.

For additional references, consult the most extensive bibliography on sign language:
<http://www.sign-lang.uni-hamburg.de/Bibweb>

The **Linguistic Society of America** was founded in 1924 for the advancement of the scientific study of language. The Society serves its nearly 7,000 personal and institutional members through scholarly meetings, publications, and special activities designed to advance the discipline.

The Society holds its Annual Meeting in early January each year and publishes a quarterly journal, *LANGUAGE* and the *LSA Bulletin*. Among its special education activities are the Linguistic Institutes held every other summer in odd-numbered years and co-sponsored by a host university.

The web site for the Society (<http://www.lsadc.org>) includes a Directory of Programs in Linguistics in the United States and Canada, The Field of Linguistics (brief, non-technical essays describing the discipline and its sub-fields), and statements and resolutions issued by the Society on matters such as language rights, the English-only/English-plus debate, bilingual education, and ebonics.

What is Sign Language?

Written by David M. Perlmutter

Linguistic Society of America

1325 18th St, NW, Suite 211
Washington, DC 20036-6501
(202) 835-1714
Isa@lsadc.org
<http://www.lsadc.org>

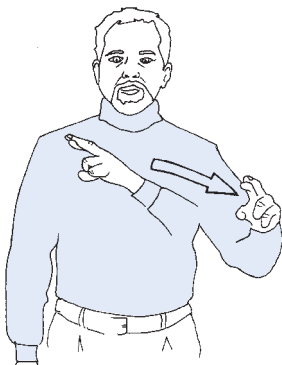
What is Sign Language?

Now is a good time to ask. During most of the 20th century, no one really knew. Not even Deaf people who used sign language in their daily lives knew what it was. Those who noticed that many thoughts are expressed differently in sign and in English assumed that sign was an ungrammatical form of English. Most Americans thought it was a way to express English words with signs—a substitute for speech. As the truth came to light in the second half of the 20th century, it surprised everyone.

Do the signs of American Sign Language (ASL) stand for English words? A simple test is to find English words that have two different meanings. If ASL signs stand for English words, there would be a sign with the same two meanings as the English word. For example, the English word “right” has two meanings: one is the opposite of “wrong,” the other is the opposite of “left.” But there is no ASL sign with these two meanings. They are expressed by two different signs in ASL, just as they are expressed by two different words in French, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, and most other languages.



Right (opposite of “wrong”)



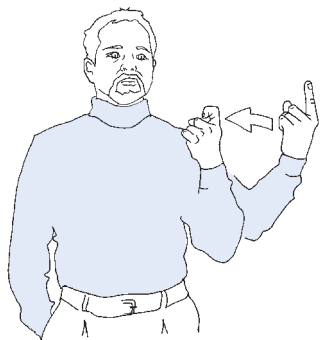
Right (opposite of “left”)

Like the words of other languages, ASL signs express meanings, not English words.

A single ASL sign can express an entire sentence that requires three words or more in English. For example, the signs below mean “I ask her,” and “she asks me.”



I ask her



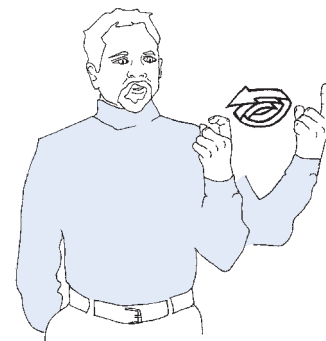
She asks me

The hand’s orientation and the direction in which it moves indicate who is asking whom. English requires three different words to express “ask,” the person asking, and the person asked. In ASL the complex meanings “I ask her” and “she asks me” are each expressed by a single sign.

A single ASL sign can express even more. Adding a circular movement to these signs produces signs meaning “I ask her for a long time” and “she asks me for a long time.”



I ask her for a long time



She asks me for a long time

Changing the movement in other ways produces signs meaning “I ask her repeatedly,” “I ask her continually,” “she asks me repeatedly,” “she asks me continually,” and others. These meanings, which English needs four words or more to express, are expressed with only one sign in ASL. ASL has many ways of combining into a single sign complex meanings that can only be expressed with a sequence of words in English. This is one of the many differences between ASL grammar and English grammar. ASL does not lack grammar; it has a grammar of its own that is different from that of English.

Yes–no questions illustrate another difference between ASL grammar and English. To change an English declarative sentence to a question, one changes the word order, sometimes adding a form of the verb “do.” For example, “She was there” becomes “Was she there?” “He worked here” becomes “Did he work here?” In ASL, a declarative and the corresponding yes–no question consist of the same signs in the same order. The difference between a statement and a

question is indicated on the face: when a yes–no question is signed, the eyebrows are raised. In an ASL conversation, signers do not watch each other’s hands; they maintain eye contact, watching each other’s faces. Grammatical information, such as the difference between statements and questions, is conveyed on the face. Signers get all the information conveyed by the hands through their peripheral vision.

Another kind of question uses question words such as “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” and “why.” In English and in most other European languages, these question words come at the beginning of the sentence, e.g. What did she buy yesterday? In ASL, this question may be expressed in several ways, including one with the question word at the end of the sentence (SHE BUY YESTERDAY WHAT?), or both at the beginning and the end (WHAT SHE BUY YESTERDAY WHAT?). This is another way that ASL grammar differs from English.

Such differences between ASL and English grammar have been discovered only since linguists began to study ASL as a language in its own right, beginning around 1960. The differences between ASL and English, once thought to show that ASL is “ungrammatical English,” have turned out to be a rich source of evidence that ASL has a grammar of its own. Indeed, ASL differs more from English in its grammatical structure than do European languages such as French, German, Spanish, and Russian. Many of the grammatical structures that distinguish ASL from English are found in other spoken languages around the world. ASL differs from English for the same reason other languages do: it is a different language. As such, it is increasingly being accepted as satisfying foreign language requirements in high schools, colleges, and universities.

The differences between ASL and English are evidence that ASL was not invented or modelled on English, but rather developed within the American Deaf community. In the same way, other sign languages have developed in other Deaf communities.