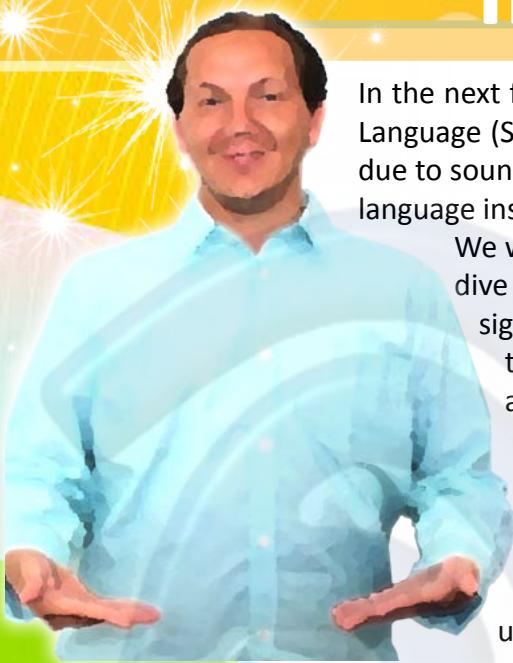




South African Sign Language



Introduction



In the next few pages we're going to be explaining what South African Sign Language (SASL) is all about. It is a fascinating language that is very unique due to sound not being used at all and how the body is used to produce the language instead of the vocal chords.

We will look at Deaf culture and what it means to be Deaf. We will dive into the morphology of SASL and look at how sentences and signs are put together. We will be referring to the video clips so that there are practical examples available. We will start this off with a look at the history of sign language and Deaf education. Sign languages are very different to spoken languages and it is hard for some people to get their heads wrapped around it. Most of us grew up with spoken languages and it feels very odd to communicate without using our vocal chords. It is something that one gets used to however.



Sign Language History

Signing has been around for many thousands of years. It was how hunters communicated when stalking prey. One of the first mentions of sign language is by Socrates when he says "If we hadn't a voice or a tongue, and wanted to express things to one another, wouldn't we try to make signs by moving our hands, head, and the rest of our body, just as dumb people do at present?". This was in Cratylus as written by Plato in the 5th century BC. There is also a language origin theory that spoken languages evolved from gestural languages.

Sign languages also emerged with groups where a vow of silence was taken. The most common of these groups are monks, who took vows of silence, and the Aboriginal people in Australia who were forbidden to speak during certain rites. In these instances signs were developed to facilitate communication.

It rose to prominence in education during the 17th century in Europe and also started a large debate that continues to this day. In France a school for the Deaf was started where French Sign Language was used as medium of instruction. In Germany, German was being used as medium of instruction.

Thus the big debate in Deaf education was started, oralism vs sign language. In 1880 there was an International Congress on the Education of the Deaf-Mutes in Milan, Italy. There were 167 attendants of which 2 were Deaf teachers. At this congress, a resolution was passed to abolish the use of sign language in Deaf education as it was not seen as a language and detrimental to education. Many countries accepted this resolution, but Britain and the United States of America did not.

An American deaf teacher who eventually became the President of the American-National Association of the deaf said that:

"As long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs, ...the noblest gift God has given to deaf people"

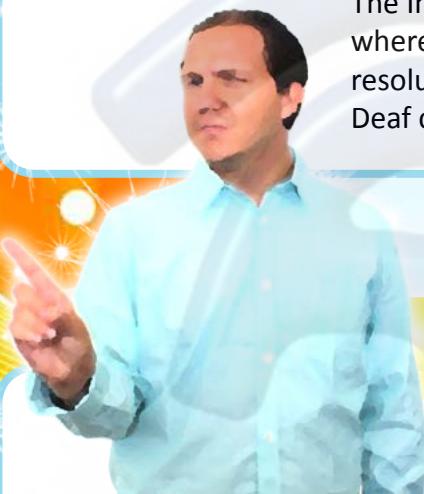


George Veditz (1913)

Sign Language History ... Continue

The impact that this decision had, and the fact that South Africa followed, was enormous. Deaf teachers who were employed at schools for the Deaf, were not able to teach anymore. By 1881 there were 3 schools for the Deaf in South Africa and any schools created afterwards would be unable to appoint Deaf teachers. This led to a negative view of SASL and a feeling that spoken languages are superior. The decision taken by the Milan congress was proven to be incorrect by William Stokoe in 1960. Dr Stokoe published an article called "Sign Language Structure" wherein he pointed out linguistic features of American Sign Language and proved that it is equitable to spoken languages.

The International Congress on Deaf Education issued a statement in 2010 wherein it declares regret for the resolutions passed in 1880 and rejected the resolutions. This was a huge step in mending the gap between hearing and Deaf communities.



What is SASL?

Sign language is a natural language

that is predominantly used by people who have difficulties communicating (sending and receiving messages) through speech. It is a visual, gestural language. This means that the modality of sign languages are visual, meaning you rely on your vision to receive messages in sign languages and you rely on your body to make specific gestures in order to send messages.

In South Africa the sign language that is used is South African Sign Language. This is different to sign languages used in different countries e.g. American Sign Language is used in the United States and British Sign Language is used in England. SASL is predominantly used by Deaf people in Southern Africa. Note the capitalised 'D'. It implies that Deaf people are a cultural group just as Afrikaans people and English people are. The cultural group of Deaf people have their own language, SASL as well as certain behaviours that

are common to members of the culture. It is a minority culture with the South African Census of 2012 counting almost 400 000 South Africans who use SASL as their mother language.

Up until 2014, SASL has not been taught in schools for the Deaf as a first language. Learners at schools for the Deaf learn SASL from their peers. This has resulted in different schools for the Deaf using many different signs for the same concept. Grammatically there is no difference, but semantically the differences can get very large. It is even possible to identify the school someone attended by looking at the signs they use.

In the past few years through technology and the abolishment of apartheid in South Africa, a slow process has started where signs have become more homogenised. There are still great differences, but as SASL is a living language, it is adapting to the needs of its users.



Deaf Culture

What is Deaf culture? It is shared system of accepted behaviours with a shared sign language as main form of communication. It is a mutually accepted way of communicating with hearing people. It is a shared value system and most often similar experiences at schools for the Deaf. I want to start this discussion by explain schools for the Deaf and what education is like for Deaf children.

Upwards of 95% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents. These children have a really tough time picking up a language because the parents are not able to sign. Therefore these children need to go to school at a very young age in order to facilitate language acquisition. At the age of 3, these children are sent to school.

Schools for the Deaf in South Africa are not in every town and city and children often need to go far from their homes to attend school and it has to

be a residential school. For the first few years they are taught speech, a spoken language and SASL. For the next 15 years these kids will stay together, moving from hostel to hostel. The school becomes more of their family than their own family, living in a town hundreds of kilometres from school. Once they leave school, they are leaving this family and need to adapt into a culture of hearing people, which is often impossible. So many Deaf people prefer to stay in areas where there are other Deaf people. Where there is a sense of community. Where they can embrace Deaf culture. Members of this culture do not view deafness as a disability. There is an understanding of visual communication. Where groups of Deaf people gather there needs to be enough light so that everyone can see each other. Deaf people in the same community often come from the same school and therefore share a very long history with each other.





Sign Language Phonology

In spoken languages there are sounds that are put together to form meaningful parts. These sounds, without meaning, are called phonemes. Now one would think that sign language wouldn't have phonemes, because it is a soundless language. There are however parts without meaning that are put together to make meaning, but instead of these parts being sounds, they are different actions and parts of your body. The 5 parts that make up a meaningful sign are: Hand shape, Orientation, Location, Movement, and Non-Manual Features.

To differentiate between English and SASL, signs will be capitalised to indicate that they are signs.

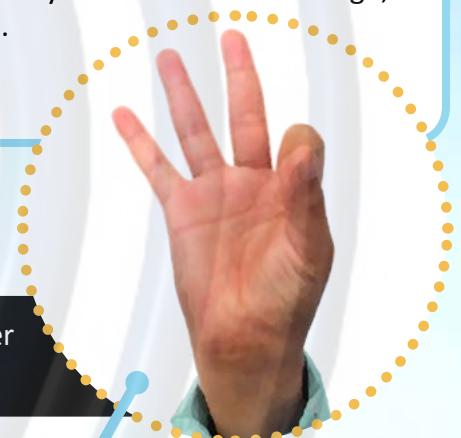
Let us take a look at the SASL video clip of 'Where is your home?'. Specifically let's look at the first sign, HOME and split that into the different phonemes that make up that sign.

Handshape

Fig. 1 – F-hand shape from www.lifeprint.com

The right hand shape is used for the sign HOME. In the video, the middle finger was used instead of the index finger, but both are accepted signs for 'home'.

The hand needs to look exactly like this for the sign to mean HOME. If a different finger is used instead of the index finger, it may be seen as a regional variant. In the case of the sign HOME both the middle and index fingers are acceptable. Also note that none of the other fingers are closed, but those needed to close the circle that your fingers are making.



Certain hand shapes have become associated with negative things e.g. the pinky as shown left:

Fig. 2 – I-hand shape from www.lifeprint.com

It is not a rule that this hand shape means something negative, but it is common to see this hand shape with negative signs e.g. STAB, BAD, MISTAKE.



Orientation

Make a note of the direction that each hand's palm is facing. That is the second part of a sign. If the direction that the palm is facing were to change, the meaning of the sign may change. For HOME the palm orientation of the left hand is to the right and the palm orientation of the right hand is to the left.

This is important in denoting ownership. The signs

for MINE and YOURS are the same except for the orientation of the palm. With the palm towards me, I am signing MINE and with the palm towards you, I am signing YOURS. In general palm orientation is divided into Up, Down, To the Left, To the Right, Towards Signer, and Away from Signer.



Location

This has to do with the placement of the sign in relation to the rest of the body. In this case the location is in neutral space which is in front of the chest.

Certain locations on the body is associated with specific concepts. Concepts that have to do with cognition are usually signed near the head and signs that have to do with emotion are usually signed against the chest. For example, if I sign HOME near my heart it means that my home is very special to me.

The location of the sign could also add meaning to the sign. Let's look at the video "Please come with me". In this video the signs we see are PLEASE WITH FOLLOW. The sign FOLLOW is quite a complex sign that carries a lot of meaning. We are using 2 hands with the same hand shape and palm orientation. The main difference is the location of the 2 hands. With one hand

behind and "following" the other hand, we are saying "I will go somewhere and you should follow me".



As another example of location adding meaning, let's look at the video "Please fill in this form". The signs we see are PLEASE FORM THIS FILL-IN GIVE. In this sentence we see the signer "holding" a form that he draws with his index fingers i.e. he first draws the form and then uses his left hand to show the form. He then "writes" on the form, which is his hand, and then hands you the form. So we can see plenty of meaning added by the correct use of location. The last sign in the sentence is GIVE. In essence what the sentence is saying is "Please fill in this form and here it is.". After signing this, one would take the form that should be filled in and pass it over to the Deaf person.

Movement

In the sign HOME we can see little movement taking place. The hands are separate and move towards each other. While this is happening the middle fingers touch the thumbs so that the 2 hands are locked together.

Movement is very pronounced in sign languages for obvious reasons; the arms and hands are moving about. Changing the movement of a sign can have the effect of an adverb (a word that gives you more information about a verb). Let's look at the example "Please sign slowly". The signs we see are PLEASE SIGN SLOW. But in this instance we

want to indicate that the person should sign slow, so we change the movement of SIGN. But in this instance we want to indicate that the person should sign slow, so we change the movement of SIGN. Instead of signing normally we sign extra slowly. To give an example in English I could say "Please talk slowly" or I could talk really slow and say "Please talk like this". This is done regularly in SASL, but not so much in English. So I could just sign PLEASE SIGN, but the sign for SIGN I would do very slowly.



Non-Manual Features

By non-manual features or NMF, we mean anything of SASL where the hands are not used. This is predominantly the face, but also the shoulders. The face is the focal point during a discussion, one does not watch how the hands are waving about, instead picking up the signs with peripheral vision and keeping eye contact.

The face gives an indication of the emotion that accompanies the sign or the mood. Signs like SAD and HAPPY require the face to follow suit. Signing HAPPY with a sad face carries a lot of meaning, unless it is done in error. The same can be said for signing SAD with a happy face.

An important part of NMF is shaking the head or nodding. When I sign COFFEE LIKE, you would

assume that I like coffee, but I could either nod or shake my head when I sign LIKE. Nodding while signing LIKE would I do like something whereas shaking my head while signing LIKE means I do not like something. Another part of SASL is the shapes that the mouth makes. In most instances the mouth shapes out corresponding words in a spoken language. For example when I sign MOTHER, my mouth would make the shape of the English word "mother". This is not a rule and there are Deaf people who do not use their mouth at all when using SASL. There are also many signs that do not have a corresponding word in English.



Conclusion

These 5 elements of a sign are the building blocks. Change any one of these elements and you change the sign. In many cases, changing the sign can add meaning to the sign. Signing faster or slower or changing the location of the sign and give more emphasis to a sign as in

the example above of signing HOME close to your heart. One can also sign slowly to indicate sympathy e.g. MOTHER YOURS PASS-AWAY would be signed slowly to indicate sympathy with the loss of a parent.





Morphological Features



Role Shifting

In SASL, just as in many other languages, storytelling has rich linguistic features. One feature that is incredibly useful is role shifting.

When role shifting is used, the signer takes on different roles by twisting the shoulders. If I were to tell a story of how my mother caught me stealing cookies, I would assume the role of both myself and my mother. I would twist my shoulders in such a way that my right shoulder was much more forward than my left shoulder; as if I am facing to the left. This would then be the position for me. I would then tell my story as myself. When I need to role shift and be my mother, I would then face the other way. I would push my right shoulder

to the back and put my left shoulder forward; as if I am facing to the right. Holding this position I would then sign whatever it is that my mother would say. And if I am shorter than my mother, I would look down while I am signing, pretending I can see a short boy standing there while I would look up when I am playing the boy. This brings a lot of depth to the story as one can accurately imitate expressions and signs. So when I role shift, I twist my shoulders and stay in that position while I am portraying any person. I would then twist my shoulders the opposite way to portray the second person.

Agreement Verbs

SASL has verbs just as any other language has. Verbs are very flexible in SASL and one is able to modify the movement of the sign to add meaning to it. Let's take the sign HELP as an example. In the video "Can I help you" we can see the signer signing HELP towards us. This means that he is asking if he can help us. He could also start the sign away

from his body and sign towards himself. In that way he is asking for help. So by moving the sign towards someone, you offer help, and by moving the sign towards yourself, you ask for help. This can be done with many verbs e.g. GIVE, VISIT, TALK, ASK, and THROW.

Rhetorical Questions

In English, rhetorical questions are used rarely, but in SASL it is used a lot. One would use question signs like WHY, WHO, WHERE, and WHEN in the middle of the sentence and then provide the answer as well. This is a big difference in rhetorical questions from how it is used in English. In English one normally does not provide or expect an answer, but in SASL one would make a statement, use a question sign and then answer the question.

TOMORROW ME VISIT MOTHER WHY MOTHER

ILL. Here we have an example of a sentence in SASL. Bear in mind that you cannot see the NMF that is used; I would lift my eyebrows and lean a bit forward when I sign WHY in the above sentence. So in the first part we can see the statement: I am visiting my mother tomorrow. I then follow with the question sign WHY and then I answer the question: why am I visiting my mother.





SASL Clips explained

Syntax of SASL

The sign order of SASL is not set in stone. There are general rules to the language, but much more research is needed. Sign languages in general follow a Topic/Comment structure where the topic

is signed first followed by comments on the topic. This is more accurate than a Subject/Object/Verb structure some people have proposed. Below I will give general guidelines to the syntax used in SASL.

- Time signs are signed first. Signs such as YESTERDAY or BEFORE are always signed first and then followed by a topic and comment.
YESTERDAY DOG MINE ILL
Here we see the time sign first, followed by a topic, DOG and then the comment.
- In general verbs are signed last. Auxiliary verbs are the exception and come after the verb
MOTHER COFFEE DRINK WILL
The last sign is WILL, which is an auxiliary verb and it is preceded by the verb DRINK.
- Adjectives and Adverbs always come after the nouns and verbs respectively.
- Articles like “the” and “and” are not signed.
- Signs do not change from tense to tense. The indication of tenses comes with the time sign at the beginning.
- If one were to sign “I have a very big house.”, one does not sign very. Instead the sign HOUSE is changed to become very big. Thus the sign implies the meaning of “very”.



Conclusion

South African Sign Language is a beautiful and intricate language. It has not enjoyed as much research as other languages, but that is changing. With 2015 being the first year where SASL is offered as a school subject in all schools for the

Deaf, I expect there to be a surge in SASL research within the next few years. SASL is tough to master, but with an attitude of learning and a bit of mingling with Deaf people, it is possible.



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR THE DEAF • SINCE 1881

📞 +27 (023) 342 5555 📎 +27 (023) 342 8866 🏠 Posbus 941, Worcester, 6849

✉️ nid@nid.org.za 🌐 www.nid.org.za