

## American Sign Language – Brief Background Information

*FROM: Oxford International Encyclopedia of Linguistics, William Frawley, Editor in Chief (soon to be published)*

### *American Sign Language*

American Sign Language (ASL) is a natural language, one of the world's signed languages. An estimated 100,000- 500,000 people in the United States and Canada use ASL in their face-to-face communication. Among deaf people, ASL is learned either as a first language or a second but preferred language. The deaf community is a multilingual community; its members use ASL as their primary language, but most are also fluent in the spoken and written language of the majority community.

### *History of ASL*

ASL is most closely related to French Sign Language (LSF). The historical contact between ASL and LSF came about in the nineteenth century when the American Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet traveled to France to learn about methods for educating deaf children. The founder of the Paris Institute had developed a system called methodical signing which used the lexical stock of signs from LSF, highly modified to represent written French. Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc, a deaf teacher at the institute, brought this system to Hartford, Connecticut, where in 1817 they established the first school for the deaf in America. The LSF-based methodical signs merged with the existing signed language dialects used in the deaf community at the time to produce ASL.

*Excerpted from: Learning to See: Teaching ASL as a Second Language. 1997. Wilcox, Sherman & Wilcox, Phyllis*

### *Is American Sign Language a Derivation of English?*

Because of its signed modality, people often assume that ASL is merely a gestural representation of English. ASL is a fully developed, natural language, one of the world's many signed languages. It is not a derivative of English; ASL contains structures and processes that English does not (Klima and Bellugi 1979). Neither is it a *simplified* language. ASL is a complete language with its own unique grammar (Fromkin 1988). It is also a rich language with a long and interesting history. In order to appreciate ASL as a language independent from spoken and written languages, and from other signed languages, students should be taught the history and structure of ASL.

### *Is ASL a Universal Language?*

No. ASL is indigenous to the United States and parts of Canada. There are many naturally occurring, indigenous signed languages in the world, just as there are many natural spoken languages. Just as people who speak English cannot understand people who speak Chinese, people (whether they are deaf or hearing) who know ASL cannot understand people who use Chinese Sign Language.

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### *Is ASL a "Foreign" Language?*

The question of whether ASL is "foreign" depends on the specific meaning of "foreign." If several people were asked what qualifies as a foreign language, most would probably respond, "a language used in another country." The foreignness of the language is directly related to whether or not it is associated with a geopolitical entity – a foreign nationality different from our own. But, the matter is not so simple. Consider the case of Navajo. Some universities in the United States teach Navajo and accept it in fulfillment of their undergraduate foreign language requirement. Yet, Navajo clearly does not originate in a foreign country – like many other languages, Navajo is indigenous to the United States. Many of the world's languages are not affiliated with nationalities and thus, under this definition, would not be considered foreign languages. Not only would this definition lead to an untenable position on the status of these languages as foreign languages, it would fail to explain some of the most important events taking place in our world today. Much of the current restructuring of the world, especially in the former Soviet bloc countries, is motivated by ethnic unrest. Much of the sense of ethnic identity derives from the use of a particular language.

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### *The Language /Mode Distinction*

The first step in understanding ASL and how it compares and contrasts with other languages is to understand what we will call the *language/mode distinction*. The concept is simple: There are languages, and there are modalities or channels for producing languages. The three major channels discussed here are the spoken, written, and signed channels (Baron 1981).

The spoken channel is the one most familiar to us – it is the primary channel for most of the world's languages. By primary, we meant that spoken languages are independent in the sense that they directly represent concepts; they do not rely on another representational system for their meaning.

The written modality, on the other hand, can be either a primary or secondary modality. Sampson (1985), for instance, gives an example of a written language that is not parasitic on speech. It is a letter sent by a girl of the Yukaghir tribe of northeastern Siberia to a young man. The letter itself looks like a stylized, abstractionist painting. Sampson demonstrates, however, that the letter contains specific content; the

interpretation of the letter is dissimilar to an interpretation of a painting, the former has a detailed and precise meaning.

What about the signed modality? It would be reasonable to assume that the signed modality functions exactly like the written modality; that, except for rare instances, it is a secondary modality for representing naturally-occurring spoken languages. This seems to be what people think when they assume that ASL is really just English. It is a reasonable assumption: People *speak and write* the same language in this country (English), so why isn't it the case that when they *sign*, it is also the same language? There is a long tradition of assuming that speech is the primary modality for representing language, and that therefore speech is synonymous with language. There exists an equally long tradition that recognizes writing as a secondary system. It is little wonder, then, that when people first encounter the signed modality, they assume that the relationship between speech and sign is the same as that between speech and writing.

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### *Acceptance of ASL as a Foreign Language*

Determining exactly which schools accept ASL as a foreign language is a difficult undertaking. There are several factors to consider, and they intermingle to form the following major types of cases:

- Schools that do not have foreign language requirements, and therefore do not have policies for accepting (or rejecting) ASL as a foreign language, even though they may teach ASL.
- Schools that do not have foreign language requirements but nevertheless have considered the matter of ASL and have come out in support of ASL as a foreign language.
- Schools that have foreign language requirements but have never considered the possibility of accepting ASL in fulfillment of the requirement.
- Schools that have foreign language requirements and have allowed certain individuals to fulfill the requirement with ASL on an *ad hoc* basis.
- Schools that have foreign language requirements and have formal policies allowing certain groups of students, for example deaf students or students majoring in deaf education, to fulfill the requirement with ASL.
- Schools that have foreign language requirements and have formal policies allowing any student to fulfill the requirement with ASL.

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### *Deaf Literature*

Literature is an important topic of study in any second language classroom, and the ASL classroom is no exception. ASL students should be exposed to the various types of literature in the Deaf community. They should learn an appreciation for the varieties of Deaf literature. ASL instructors are cautioned not to be overly restrictive in their conception of Deaf literature. There is currently no commonly accepted written form of

ASL. The Deaf community is a bilingual, trimodal community. Both of these facts must be taken into account when incorporating Deaf literature into the ASL instruction.

First, ASL instructors need to remember that literary works need not be recorded in writing to constitute literature. Frishberg (1988) builds a strong case for the literary status of unwritten language, and this certainly includes ASL. Many of the world's languages are unwritten. This certainly does not mean that no literary works exist in these languages. Many of the "classics" of literature – the Bible, the Greek dramas – were originally unwritten. Although ASL is still an unwritten language, there exists a long and rich history of folk literature in the language. Much of this literature has been recorded on film or videotape and can serve as an excellent source of study in the ASL classroom.

Second, the point must be made that although there are many literary works in ASL, which second language students can and should learn about, ASL is not the only language in which Deaf literature appears. Deaf writers, dramatists, and poets often use English as their medium (see, for example, the Deaf authors in Wilcox 1989). These works should be recognized as Deaf literature and incorporated into the ASL classroom. Of course, they do not provide students with examples of the literary use of ASL. They can, nevertheless, serve as eloquent testimony of Deaf identity, and of individual and cultural definition. Especially for students who have not acquired fluency in ASL, Deaf literary works in English can be invaluable.

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### *Oratory*

Frishberg (1988) has identified three genres of ASL literature: oratory, folklore, and performance art. Oratory has a long history in ASL literature. Current examples of ASL oratorical style can be seen in religious ceremonies, dinner speeches, keynote addresses, and graduation ceremonies. Bringing oratorical literature into the ASL classroom may be rather difficult.

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### *Folklore*

The second style that Frishberg discusses is folklore. There is a wide variety of folklore in ASL that can be used in the ASL classroom. Examples include name signs, jokes, riddles, historical anecdotes, and ABC stories (Rutherford 1988, 1989).

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### *Performance Art*

The final style discussed by Frishberg is performance art. This includes poetry in ASL and other scripted works. Videotapes of Deaf poets performing their works are still relatively rare. However, some recordings of ASL poetry are available on videotape, such as *Deaf Heritage*, produced by the San Francisco Public Library; the *Deaf Culture* series produced and available from Sign Media, Inc.; *The Treasure*, produced by InMotion Press; and *ASL Poetry* by Dawn Sign Press.

## Universities that Accept ASL in Fulfillment of Foreign Language Requirements

	AAU Member	PAC-10
Abilene Christian University		
American University		
Antioch College (Ohio)		
Arizona State University		
Baylor University		YES
Brigham Young University		
Brown University		
Cabrillo College (CA)	YES	
CSU Fresno		
CSU Hayward		
CSU Monterey Bay		
CSU Northridge		
CSU Sacramento		
CSU San Marcos		
Catholic University		
Centralia College		
Clemson University		
College of Southern Idaho		
College of Staten Island		
College of St. Rose (NY)		
Dallas Baptist University		
East Central Oklahoma St. University		
Eastern Washington University		
Elms College (MA)		
The Evergreen College		
Gardner-Webb University		
George Mason University		
Georgetown University		
Holy Cross College (MA)		
Houston Baptist University		
Howard University		
Howard Payne University		
Indiana University		
Lamar University	YES	
Lubbock Christian University		
MacMurray College (IL)		
Madonna University		
Mary Hardin Baylor University		
Mass. Institute of Technology		
Miami University (OH)	YES	
Michigan State University		
Neuman College (PA)	YES	
New York University (School of Education)		
National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NY)	YES	
Northeastern University		
Ohio State University		
Oklahoma Baptist University	YES	
Oklahoma State University		

AAU

PAC 10

Pacific Lutheran University		
Purdue University		
Russell Sage College (NY)	YES	
Sacramento Community College		
San Antonio College		
Southwest Texas State University		
Stanford University		
SUNY Brockport	YES	YES
SUNY Buffalo		
SUNY Geneseo	YES	
SUNY Oswego		
Stephen F. Austin University		
Tennessee Temple University		
Texas A&M University - Commerce		
Texas Tech University	YES	
Texas Wesleyan University		
Texas Woman's University		
Trinity University		
U of Akron		
U of Alaska (Fairbanks)		
U of Arizona		
U of Arkansas (Little Rock)	YES	YES
UC San Diego		
UC Davis	YES	
University of Central Florida	YES	
University of Chicago		
University of Cincinnati	YES	
* University of Colorado - Boulder		
University of Florida	YES	
University of Georgia (Athens)	YES	
University of Hawaii (Manoa)		
University of Iceland		
University of Iowa		
* University of Kansas	YES	
University of Louisville (KY) *	YES	
University of Maryland **		
University of Massachusetts		
University of Maine at Machias		
University of Minnesota		
University of New Hampshire (Durham)	YES	
University of New Hampshire (Wilmington)		
University of New Mexico		
* UNC Charlotte		
UNC Wilmington		
University of North Florida		
University of North Texas (Denton)		
University of Oklahoma		
University of Pennsylvania		
University of Pittsburgh	YES	
University of Rochester	YES	
USC	YES	

	AAU	PAC 10
University of South Florida	YES	YES
University of Southern Florida		
University of Texas - Austin		
University of Texas - Pan American	YES	
University of Texas - San Antonio		
University of Utah		
* University of Virginia		
* University of Washington	YES	
University of Wyoming	YES	YES
Utah Valley State College		
Vassar College		
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University		
Washington State University		
West Virginia University (School of Journalism Majors)		YES
Western Oregon University		
Western Washington University		
William Rainey Harper College		
William Woods University		
Wright State University (OH)		
Xavier University		
Yale University		
Youngstown State University	YES	

\* - VO comparators

