

# The Grammar of Sign Language

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# *The Grammar of Sign Language*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sign languages are natural visual-gestural languages comparable to other natural spoken languages. Although sign languages share many common universal features, considerable variation may be found amongst them. In this article the phonology, morphology, syntax and certain discourse features of sign languages and other natural languages are compared. Evidence is presented to demonstrate that both spoken and signed languages involve similar processes and rules regardless of the languages' modalities.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sign languages are naturally-occurring languages which develop as a result of the need to communicate among members of deaf communities. They are visual-gestural languages which are produced by using the hands, face, and upper torso and are

processed visually. In contrast, spoken languages are produced using the mouth, tongue and vocal cords and are processed orally.

Linguists and psychologists have found overwhelming evidence that sign languages are natural languages comparable to all other languages that have been studied. William Stokoe, the American linguist, was the first person to investigate a known sign language, American Sign Language (ASL) (Stokoe 1960). This landmark study challenged the traditional belief that deaf people were deviant people who needed to be rehabilitated into the mainstream of hearing society. This view was mainly held by medical practitioners and the teaching profession. While doctors strove to reinstate the hearing sense, teachers endeavoured to teach deaf children using the oral method. This method involved teaching and communicating with the deaf through the medium of spoken language (speech). The belief that the deaf could be taught to acquire speech naturally was so strong that in 1880 at a conference in Milan, an attempt was made to eradicate sign language from the face of the earth. The conference, which was attended by hearing teachers and educationalists, excluding the deaf, passed a resolution which banned sign language from use in schools for the deaf. Sign language became an underground language. Deaf children, however, continued to use sign language outside the classroom situation and it remained a living and natural language. In the words of George Verditz, an American deaf teacher who went on to become the President of the National Association of the Deaf: "As long as we have deaf people, we will have Sign Language" (quoted in Padden 1988).

The Milan Conference ban on sign language stayed in place until 1960 when Stokoe's study was published. In it he showed that ASL is a language that is made up of phonological, morphological and syntactic units (like all other languages). The oralists were not ready to accept the fact that sign language, a language that occurs in the visual-gestural modality, was a language. However, they compromised by deciding that if the deaf were to sign, then they had to speak at the same time. This gave rise to the invention of Simultaneous Communication (Simcom) or Total Communication (TC) (Gustason et al. 1980). This is a system adapted by the oralists in an attempt to represent English (or any spoken language for that matter) visually, despite the fact that spoken languages and sign language each have their own grammatical structures.

## **IS SIGN LANGUAGE UNIVERSAL?**

The question "Is sign language a universal language?" is very common among the non-deaf people. If this question is answered in the negative, it is always followed by another question, "Why not?". As in the case of Esperanto, an attempt was made to create/invent a universal sign language – "Gestuno". Both attempts failed for various reasons, the main one being that a language needs a community who uses it daily, not a community which meets once every two or four years for a five-day conference.

Different sign languages have developed in different parts of the world. These include American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL), Japanese Sign Language (JSL), and in the

case of South Africa, South African Sign Language (SASL). This is a pointer to the fact that there is not just one universal Sign Language but many sign languages, although there are some features and signs which are shared by all known and documented sign languages.

## **ARE SIGN LANGUAGES NATIONAL?**

While we cannot talk of a universal Sign Language, because signs are culturally determined, we can talk of a national sign language (Akach 1991). This is to say that the deaf in South Africa, for example, form a language community. We cannot talk of Zulu Sign Language, English Sign Language, Xhosa Sign Language, Afrikaans Sign Language, Tswati Sign Language etc., as the visual-gestural units of communication used in SASL and its grammar are independent of the various spoken languages found in South Africa. Moreover, unlike spoken languages, SASL is not confined within ethnic boundaries. The deaf community of South Africa is not restricted to one common geographical area – deaf individuals live within the broader society. This is supported by the well-known statistics that 90% of deaf people are born to hearing parents while only 10% are born to deaf parents. The majority of deaf children do not, therefore, acquire Sign Language naturally as a mother tongue because they lack a signing environment at home. This is due to the long-standing view of deafness as pathological, contributing to the suppression of Sign Language. Deaf children, however, learn Sign Language at a later stage from peers in schools for the deaf (Newport 1988 and 1990). Schools for the deaf are considered homes away from home

because it is at school that deaf children meet others like themselves, sharing a common means of communication and hence a culture. Unless a deaf child joins a school for the deaf, s/he lives in isolation in the speaking environment without knowing of the existence of other deaf people.

SASL, as developed and used by deaf South Africans, may have some regional differences and variations, but has the same grammatical structure countrywide and also shares some features with all known and documented signed languages. (This is an area for ongoing research.)

The most obvious feature of signed languages is that they use a different modality from that utilised by spoken languages. Signed languages are languages in the *spatial* modality and as such, they exploit the medium of space maximally and most efficiently. The medium of space is used to express the relationship of elements in the language to one another. Signed languages are processed visually whereas spoken languages are processed aurally.

Since Stokoe (1960) showed that ASL had a phonology, morphology and syntax of its own, quite different from English, research into other sign languages has revealed the same principles. A small body of researchers began to uncover the underlying principles of ASL grammar during the 1960s and 70s. Since then, there have been researchers working on the structure, the acquisition, the discourse and pragmatics of sign languages. Psychologists and neurolinguists have also investigated what the study of sign language tells us about the human brain. Many

researchers have been fascinated by the properties of languages that use space to encode their grammar (Bellugi et al. 1989).

## **THE PROPERTIES OF SIGN LANGUAGE**

Sign language, as a visual-gestural language, is made in space and uses space to express its grammar. This means that space is not only the medium in which the signs are made, but is used in a very specific way to express relationships between items in the language.

### **Phonology**

Speakers of a language not only produce and perceive the sounds of their language but also know how these sounds work together as a system (Valli et al. 1992). It is this system that linguists study when they investigate the structure of a language. The smallest contrastive linguistic unit is a phoneme and phonology is the study of how these units are contrasted and organised. In spoken languages, phonemes are regarded as representations of the smallest contrastive units of sound. In English for instance, the word *cat* is made up of three phonemes: [k], [æ] and [t]. The word *bat* is made of three phonemes: [b], [æ] and [t]. These two words can be contrasted phonologically and it can be seen that the only difference between the two words is in the first phoneme in each word. It is this phonological contrast that is solely responsible for the difference in meaning between these two English words.

How can sign languages, which are distinguished by the complete absence of sound, have phonology when the word *phon-* actually means "sound"? It should be noted that even in spoken languages, phonemes are an abstraction. They are representations of the combination of distinctive features that identify particular sounds. Different languages use different sets of phonemes chosen from among all possible phonemes and structured in language-specific ways with respect to other phonemes. Phonology can be seen as an abstract system for the organisation of the smallest distinctive units of language, i.e. sounds in spoken languages. A language that does not have sound can also have similar representation of its smallest linguistic parts which is analogous to the representation used for spoken languages. So sign language linguists use the term phonology to refer to the study of how signs are structured and organised (Valli et al. 1992).

## **THE STRUCTURE OF THE SIGN**

Sign language signs have five basic articulatory parameters. These are handshape, movement, location, palm orientation and non-manual signals, e.g. facial expressions. Signs can share one or more of the same parameters and can be contrasted with each other by a change in any of these parameters. Research shows that in sign languages, any combination of these parameters can occur simultaneously to make up the sign.

In SASL, we can show the same sorts of phonological contrasts that we demonstrated for spoken languages. For example, the sign



FACE-CREAM has the same location as the sign CUTE but differs in handshape (Fig. 1).

(Please note that we are using English glosses in the upper case to approximate SASL signs. These are not translations of the signs but guidelines for the readers to indicate the signs that are being used.)

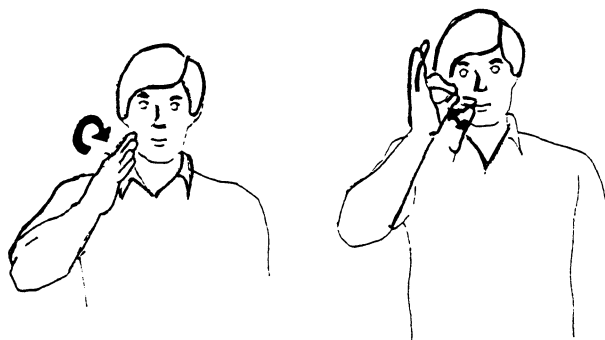


Figure 1 FACE-CREAM

CUTE

The difference between these two is in the handshape. Thus the signs are identical in all respects except for the handshape. The handshape is therefore phonologically contrastive. It is the difference in the handshape alone that makes the difference in the meaning of two signs. The parameter of handshape itself has no meaning. It contributes to the meaning of the sign as a whole when combined in a context with the other three parameters. Other examples of this contrastive feature are:



Figure 2 EASY



OLD

Now let's look at a contrast in **location**. We will compare the signs YOUR and BRAVE.

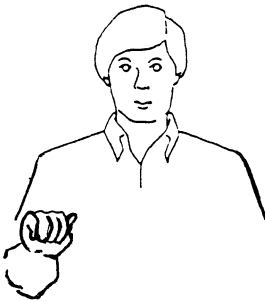


Figure 3 YOUR



BRAVE

The difference between these two signs is in the location. In YOUR, the location is the neutral space in front of the signer and in the sign BRAVE, the location is on the chest. Thus the signs are identical in all respects except for the location. So, if we compare these two signs, the location is phonologically contrastive. It is the

difference in the location only that makes a difference between the meaning of the two signs. Although the location itself has no meaning, it contributes to the meaning of the sign as a whole when combined in a context with three other parameters.

In comparing the signs WANT and HAPPY, we will show a contrast in the parameter of movement.

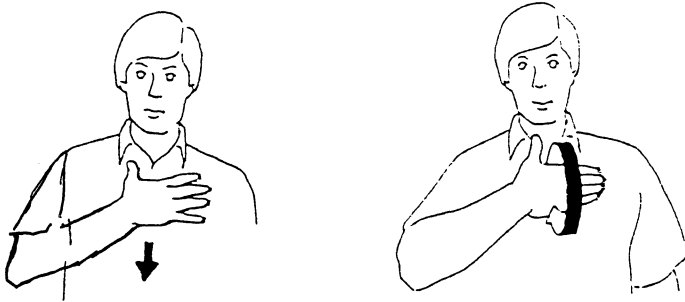


Figure 4 WANT

HAPPY

The only difference between the two signs in Figure 4 is in the movement. In WANT, the flat hand (B-handshape) makes a downward brushing movement with the palm facing the body. In the case of HAPPY, the movement is circular; the other parameters remain the same. So, if we compare the two signs, the movement is phonologically contrastive. In itself, movement has no meaning but combined with other parameters in context, it contributes to meaning.

The last example of this set shows a contrast in the parameter of palm orientation. We will compare the signs MAYBE and CHILDREN.

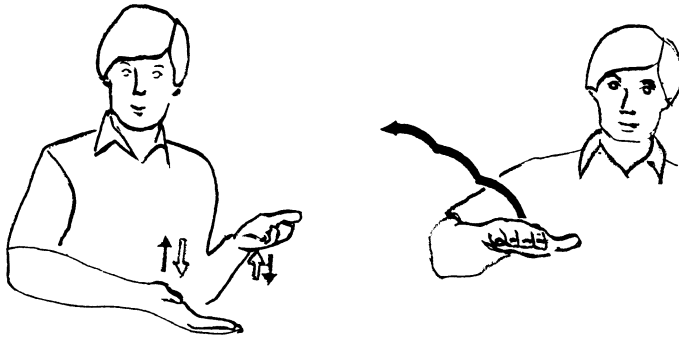


Figure 5 MAYBE

CHILDREN

The difference between these two signs is in the palm orientation. In MAYBE, the palm is facing upward while in CHILDREN, the palm faces downward, parallel to the ground. The signs are identical in all respects except for the palm orientation. Like other parameters, the palm orientation is phonologically contrastive. On its own it has no meaning, but combined with other parameters in context, it contributes to the meaning of the sign as a whole.

An interesting feature of these parameters is that, because of the spatial modality, they can occur simultaneously. Thus, more than one piece of linguistic information can be conveyed at one time. This discovery, namely that Sign Language uses simultaneous organisation of phonological information, was made at a time when it was believed that spoken language phonology was organised sequentially. This contrast between spoken and signed language phonology was regarded as a significant difference based on modality. Subsequently, however, it was shown that spoken language phonology is simultaneously as well as sequentially

organised as intonation in spoken language occurs simultaneously with other phonemic information.

It was also shown that sign languages have a sequential organisation of units with signs being made up of a sequence of movements and holds, equivalent to the way that vowels and consonants are put together in spoken languages. It was pointed out by various people that all ASL signs are made up of a combination of movements and holds (Kegl and Wilbur 1976, Ellenberger 1977 and Newkirk 1981) and later elaborated and developed by several other researchers, viz. Liddell and Johnson (1989), Perlmutter (1992) and Sandler (1989).

Movements are analogous to vowels in spoken languages as they flow through the air without obstruction, while holds are analogous to consonants as they are obstructions of the flow of movement through the air. In every sign, the bundle of features that makes up the hand configuration is either in a steady state (stationary) or else it is moving. Movements and holds cannot occur at the same time, so they cannot be simultaneous. Movements and holds occur sequentially and so we can say that signed languages also have sequential organisation of their phonemes.

The following are some SASL examples of how signs are sequentially organised in terms of movements and holds, concurring with Liddell and Johnson's (1989) explication of the sequential organisation of ASL.

<b>Sign</b>	<b>Sequential Structure</b>
ALWAYS	Consists of one movement
READ	Consists of one hold
ME/MY	Consists of movement-hold
HAPPY	Consists of movement-movement-movement-hold

Thus, the phonology of spoken and signed languages, each involving both simultaneous and sequential combinations of phonemes, can be regarded as being rather similar. Both spoken and signed language phonology involve similar processes and rules. This provides interesting evidence about the nature of the human phonological system, which is the same regardless of the language's modality.

## **Morphology**

Morphology is the study of the smallest meaningful units of language and the way in which they are combined. In English, morphemes, the smallest meaningful units of language, are combined sequentially. Thus, the following example shows how different morphemes are combined in English (each morpheme contributes some information to the meaning of the word):

un + fortun + ate + ly

The morphologies of ASL and other sign languages have been extensively studied and research shows that the morphology of sign languages is rich and complex and readily accessible because

of its visibility in the spatial modality. This means that space is used efficiently to establish different morphemes. All morphemes convey some aspect of meaning. Because of the spatial modality, more than one piece of meaningful information can be conveyed at one time, as opposed to English, which can only express one morpheme at a time.

In sign language, a great deal of inflectional information can be conveyed simultaneously with other meaningful information. A change in movement of a sign can provide additional morphological information. For example, the sign meaning "to look at" is produced with a certain handshape, at a certain location, with a certain movement and palm orientation. A change in the movement of that sign can produce signs meaning "to look at for a long time", "to look at repeatedly", "to look at intently" and others.

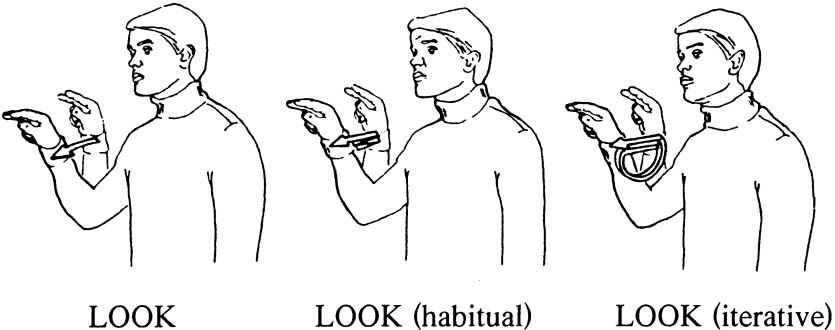


Figure 6 (Reproduced from Valli and Lucas 1992)

In sign language, aspectual information, for instance, is provided morphologically. Aspectual information is often encoded directly in the verb signs themselves, as shown above. New signs can be made from the basic verb stem LOOK simply by changing the movement of the sign. We get more information about the manner in which the looking happens. All this information is contained simultaneously in one sign. In English, the same aspectual information may be expressed by the phrase *to look for a long time*. Other kinds of aspectual information such as the idea of ongoing action "look-ing" is expressed in English by means of auxiliaries and word endings. The same meanings are achieved in spoken as in signed languages. The language exploits the nature of modality differently, however, in order to produce equivalent results in the most efficient way.

So a single sign may be expressed in English as meaning "to gaze at intently for a long time". In certain languages, including English, this information is provided syntactically, i.e. by a phrase, rather than by one word. In sign language(s), all this information is expressed morphologically, in one word. In this case, many English words are needed to express the information that can be conveyed in one sign in sign language (see Figure 6).

Many sign languages, including SASL, are agglutinating languages which use a system of embedded morphemes to convey a great deal of information within one sign. Thus, the morphological structure of sign languages is similar to certain other agglutinating languages, such as Turkish, Kiswahili, or Eskimo, which embed many morphemes into one long word. For example, it is possible, building on the basic morpheme meaning "to go from one location



to another", to use a handshake meaning "in a vehicle", and a movement which is both sharp and at a steep angle, to embed into one sign the meaning "to travel in a car very fast up a steep hill":

### TRAVEL-IN-VEHICLE-FAST-UP-STEEP-HILL

Different languages achieve this result differently: English uses a series of isolated words, while Eskimo and Sign Language use agglutinating morphemes in the same word or sign, Eskimo serially and Sign Language simultaneously. Although languages differ systematically from each other, they function comparably to express similar ideas and events.

### Classifier (CL) System

An important part of any sign language morphology is the classifier system. Classifiers are used in spoken languages too, and usually mark the class to which an item belongs. In Bantu languages classifiers are used to mark the superordinate class or group to which a noun belongs. In Kiswahili, for instance, the noun meaning 'boy' belongs to a class of humans and it therefore bears the prefix that indicates membership of that class:

#### "m" class:

<i>mtu</i>	- 'person'
<i>mtoto</i>	- 'child'
<i>mvulana</i>	- 'boy'

In sign languages, the classifier (CL) system forms the basis of the language (Supalla 1986 and Schick 1990). Classifier handshapes mark the class or group to which a noun belongs. Classifier handshapes include the whole-entity morpheme (e.g. PERSON), surface morpheme (e.g. DESERT), instrument morpheme (e.g. HOLD-CUP), depth and width morpheme (e.g. POLE), extent morpheme (e.g. FLAT-TYRE), perimeter-shape morpheme (e.g. PICTURE-FRAME) and on-surface morpheme (e.g. CROWD-OF-PEOPLE).

The classifier handshape for rabbit (and other small animals) is a bent V. If we want to say *The rabbit ran down the street*, we embed the V-handshape into the movement path of the sign, which will show the direction and manner of the rabbit's movement (running down the street):

CL - bent V - RUN

We can also embed the information *down the hill, run around a sharp bend*, etc.

This complex construction is called a classifier predicate. Many sign languages use classifier handshapes to express the class to which a noun belongs and then to show that noun as either stationary or in the process of moving to another location. Expressing physical movement or location in sign language is usually achieved through the use of these complex classifier predicate constructions.

If we remember that sign languages (SASL, ASL, BSL, KSL, etc.) are languages that are made in space, it makes sense to use space to describe real objects that are either stationary in one place or moving from one place to another. So, the classifier system is one important way in which sign languages use space effectively to express aspects of movement and location.

## Syntax

Syntax is the study of the sentence structure of a language, i.e. how words are grouped hierarchically into phrases and then phrases into sentences. In English a sentence consists minimally of a noun phrase and a verb phrase. Look at the following English sentence:

*The dog ate the bone*

This sentence consists of:

- A noun phrase (NP).....*the dog*
- A verb phrase (VP).....*ate the bone*

In turn, the verb phrase consists of:

- A verb.....*ate*
- A noun phrase.....*the bone*

The NP can be broken down further to include:

- The determiner (D).....*the*
- The noun (N).....*bone*

Sign language syntax is different from that of English, but no more so than other historically unrelated spoken languages are. For example, Japanese syntax is also different from that of English. The English sentence *Are you a student?* in Japanese would be *Anata wa gakusei desuka*, which can be glossed as "You are student, not so?", with the question word at the end. Despite the differences, however, the syntax of all natural human languages has a great deal in common at a very basic level. All languages are made up of sentences that contain noun phrases and verb phrases that are combined hierarchically.

Direct gloss translation (i.e. writing an English word corresponding to each sign) could lead people to believe that sign languages have an inferior, fractured sort of syntax because when we gloss in this way, sign language sounds like broken English. This, of course, is true of any language in direct gloss translation like the Japanese sentence given above. On the surface, every language has its own special syntax. At a deep level, all natural languages share a basic structure, which is why humans can learn any human language under the right conditions.

Sign language syntax is built on a set of spatial contrasts. Space is used to make grammatical distinctions. Space and the body are used to show the relationships between different elements in the sentence. Sentences in all languages are made up minimally of noun phrases and verb phrases. In addition, different languages have different ways of expressing adjectives, adverbs, tense and agreement, pronouns, determiners and other syntactic categories.

In sign language, space is used to establish a frame for any discourse or extended piece of language in context. Sign language uses three-dimensional space to set up points to represent places or people or things. Nouns are located in space. That is, a given noun is signed and then assigned a specific place in the discourse space. This may be done by pointing to the space in which the noun is located or by gazing at it. Each unique referent is assigned a unique point in space. Reference to these points is consistent: thus, if BOY is assigned a particular point in space, every time that the signer points to or gazes at that point, s/he is referring to BOY. This reference is often pronominal. It could mean "he", "him" or "his", but it always refers to the noun BOY which has been set in that space. This is how cohesion of the discourse is maintained until a new discourse context is established.

## **Agreement**

Sign language has verbs which agree with their subjects and their objects. In some cases, this agreement can actually be seen spatially, that is, the verb sign begins in the location where the subject noun sign has been set up, and ends in the location where the object noun sign has been set up. For example, if we want to sign *John bothers Mary*, we set JOHN in **location A** and MARY in **location B**. The sign BOTHER begins at **location A** (John's location) and ends in **location B** (Mary's location), we say that the sign BOTHER agrees spatially with its subject JOHN and its object MARY:

JOHN MARY BOTHER

In the case of verbs such as these, the morphological information is so rich and redundant that the language does not have to repeat morphemes. If JOHN and MARY have already been set up in the signing space, then we do not have to sign JOHN and MARY again. The whole meaning of the sign is "He (John) bothers her (Mary)". Sign language takes the advantage of the fact that the information is already there and does not need to be repeated. When languages take advantage of morphological information that is already there, this is called *pro-drop*. This phenomenon is found in many languages of the world in which morphology is very rich, for example, Italian and Hebrew. The sentence *John misses Mary*, however, can be expressed in sign language as:

### JOHN MISS MARY

We know that it is John who is doing the missing, but in this case, unlike that of JOHN MARY BOTHER, the verb does not agree spatially with its subject and object. The path of the verb sign does not move in space between the location of JOHN and MARY. In such cases, we rely more on word (sign) order to help us to understand which is the subject and which the object of the verb. The agreement is still there but we cannot see it spatially as in JOHN MARY BOTHER.

### Tense

There are different ways of expressing time in sign languages. One way is to use adverbs of time like YESTERDAY, TOMORROW, NEXT WEEK, LAST YEAR, etc. Another way is to set up the

time at the beginning of the discourse. So, the signer might start off by signing LAST YEAR, signalling that all the events that are being referred to took place last year. The time frame remains the same until the signer changes it.

Time can also be expressed by the tense of a verb, for example . Present, Past or Future .Tense is a grammatical category. There are some signs that can be used that tell us something about the tense of an utterance. Examples of these are the signs WILL and PAST/BEFORE.

### **Non-manual Grammatical Marking**

Sign language has a most interesting way of expressing parts of its grammar. A great deal of sign language grammar is conveyed by using facial expressions. We call these facial expressions non-manual grammatical markings. Sometimes, sign language sentences with the expected word order appear weird or ungrammatical. The reason for this is usually that the string of signs actually needs to be accompanied by an appropriate facial expression in order to make it grammatical. Baker-Shenk (1983) and Aarons, Bahan, Kegl and Neidle (1992) have discussed the analysis of the distribution and spread of these non-manual grammatical markings.

Many types of grammatical markings are expressed non-manually. For example, **wh-questions** are accompanied by the lowering of the eyebrows, a frown, head forward and a slight lift, such as:

**wh-q**  
JOHN BUY WHAT  
What did John buy?

The solid line above the sentence represents the facial expression for a **wh-question**, which begins when the first sign is made and is held until the end of the utterance.

Yes/no questions are expressed by raising the eyebrows. An example of this is:

**y/n**  
JOHN BUY BOOK  
Did John buy a book?

Rhetorical questions are accompanied by the non-manual marking reserved for rhetorical questions:

**rh-q**  
JOHN BUY WHAT...BOOK  
What did John buy? A book.  
(What John bought was a book.)

Negation in Sign Language is usually marked non-manually by a shaking of the head and a frowning of the brows. If the non-manual expression is present, it is not necessary to use the sign NOT, as long as the non-manual marking accompanies the appropriate part of the sentence. Here is an example of non-manual marking of negation:



neg  
JOHN NOT BUY CAR  
John did not buy a car

Sign language also uses non-manual marking to identify the topic of the sentence. English marks sentence topics in various different ways using fixed phrases, for example: *As for vegetables, ..., speaking of John, ..., About last night, ..., On the subject of travel, ...*. In sign language, however, with the correct marking, the signer establishes what s/he is going to discuss or focus on. Topics are introduced at the beginning of a sentence, and a certain non-manual facial expression accompanies them. Different kinds of topic are accompanied by different kinds of facial expressions (Aarons 1994). Here are some examples:

t  
BILL HILARY LOVE  
Bill loves Hilary

t  
VEGETABLE, GEORGE PREFER BROCCOLI  
As for vegetables, George prefers broccoli

There is still work to be done in identifying all the different grammatical non-manual facial markings that occur in different sign languages of the world, and especially in SASL. However, we know that these usually involve some combination of brow movement, tilt of the face, mouth tension and eye-gaze.

Studies of sign language syntax have shown that sign languages have a syntax which is governed by the same universal principles as other languages. They have tense, subject-verb, and verb-object agreement, form questions in a regular way and there is a hierarchical ordering of constituent parts of the sentence. Thus, despite the fact that they use an entirely different modality to manifest their grammar, sign languages are formally comparable to any other human languages.

### **Discourse**

Space is also used in sign language to show narrative point of view. Bahan and Pettito (1980) and Loew (1984) have studied ASL narratives in detail to show this. A signer can shift the head, shoulders, or entire torso to assume the role of another person in a discourse.

Role-shift is a device used by a signer to portray dialogues, or show reported speech, or to shift perspective to another character's point of view. Role-shifting exploits the fact that in sign language, characters are established at a specific spatial location. This is a use of space that relies on the characters having been previously given a unique location in space. These locations are referred to consistently so each character is spatially identified and the unity of the story or discourse world is maintained until the signer changes it. Establishing unique referents in space, thus, is an essential part of sign language discourse, and the language fully exploits these contrasts both at the syntactic and discourse level.

In a spoken language such as English, shifts of perspective, reported speech, and changes of voice are achieved through different tones, changes in intonation patterns or through devices like *he said*, *she asked*, etc.

In spoken languages, turn-taking is usually established by speakers indicating that they have finished what they want to say. This can be achieved through prosody, tone of voice, or non-verbally. Speakers may also interrupt verbally or by throat clearing or body movement. Turn-taking in Sign Language discourse is determined by the modality. Because it is a visual-gestural language, rules of turn-taking in conversation require that signers look at one another. If someone's face is turned away or eyes are shut then it is not possible for them to know when the other person is finished signing or when the other person wants to say something. So, signers must face each other and co-operative turn-taking is achieved through signers monitoring one another visually. Of course, if a signer does not want to yield the floor, he may avoid looking at the other signer. So, face-to-face communication is an important precondition for sign language turn-taking (Baker and Padden 1978).

The rules for cooperative conversation proposed by Grice for spoken language are the same for cooperative conversation in any given sign language. Grice's conversational maxims are that speakers should try to be relevant and stay on the topic that is being discussed; they should try to make themselves as clear as possible; they should provide enough but not too much information and they should be truthful (Grice 1975). These maxims are just as appropriate for a Sign Language discourse as they are for

discourse in any other language and speakers know the consequences of breaking these implicit rules.

## CONCLUSION

We have looked at the properties of sign language and its linguistic structure. We have seen that sign languages are fully capable of expressing the full range of human experiences. Like any spoken languages, sign language can be used for joking, lying, acting, gossiping, sarcasm, swearing, political propaganda, poetry and anything else its users might want to use it for. But there are also rules governing its appropriate use in context. These rules are embedded in the culture of users of a given sign language, for example, the South African deaf culture.

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