

CULTURE/LANGUAGE NOTES

Introduction to American Sign Language

Many people mistakenly believe that American Sign Language (ASL) is English conveyed through signs. Some think that it is a manual code for English, that it can express only concrete information, or that there is one universal sign language used by Deaf people around the world.

Linguistic research demonstrates, however, that ASL is comparable in complexity and expressiveness to spoken languages. It is not a form of English. It has its own distinct grammatical structure, which must be mastered in the same way as the grammar of any other language. ASL differs from spoken languages in that it is visual rather than auditory and is composed of precise handshapes and movements.

ASL is capable of conveying subtle, complex, and abstract ideas. Signers can discuss philosophy, literature, or politics as well as football, cars or income taxes. Sign Language can express poetry as poignantly as can any spoken language and can communicate humor, wit, and satire just as biting. As in other languages, new vocabulary items are constantly being introduced by the community in response to cultural and technological change.

ASL is not universal. Just as hearing people in different countries speak different languages, so do Deaf people around the world sign different languages. Deaf people in Mexico use a different sign language from that used in the U.S. Because of historical circumstances, contemporary ASL is more like French Sign Language than like British Sign Language.

ASL was developed by American Deaf people to communicate with each other and has existed as long as there have been Deaf Americans. Standardization was begun in 1817 when Laurent Clerc and Thomas H. Gallaudet established the first School for the Deaf in the U.S. Students afterwards spread the use of ASL to other parts of the U.S. and Canada. Traditionally, the language has been passed from one generation to the next in the residential school environment, especially through dormitory life. Even when signs were not permitted in the classroom, the children of Deaf parents, as well as Deaf teachers and staff, would secretly pass on the language to other students. ASL is now used by approximately one-half million Deaf people in the U.S. and Canada.

Since the late 1800's, Deaf people have been discouraged from using ASL. Many well-meaning but misguided educators, believing that the only way for deaf people to fit into the hearing world is through speech and lipreading, have insisted that deaf children try to learn to speak English. Some have even gone so far as to tie down deaf children's hands to prevent them from signing. Despite these and other attempts to discourage signing, ASL continues to be the preferred language of the Deaf community. Far from seeing the use of sign as a handicap, Deaf people regard ASL as their natural language which reflects their cultural values and keeps their traditions and heritage alive. In this class, you will see how ASL has shaped and is shaped by the culture of Deaf Americans.

Introduction to the Deaf Community

In the spring of 1988, student protesters at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. sent a loud and clear message to the world: "Prejudice is believing that deaf people have to be taken care of."

Gallaudet trustees had set the spark for this campus protest by ignoring the wishes of Deaf students that a Deaf person be chosen as the 124-year-old college's seventh president. Instead, the trustees chose as president a person who is not only hearing, but also unable to communicate in Sign Language. Students erupted in a rage. They boycotted classes and blockaded entrances to the college signing "Deaf Power." The protest quickly mushroomed into a national debate over the civil rights of Deaf people. The students received support from Deaf communities around the world. The reason is that Gallaudet, which was founded by an act of Congress in 1864, has become one of the world's foremost educational centers for Deaf people. Yet it has never had a Deaf president - the result, said students and staff, of the paternalism of the hearing world that perpetuates the myth that Deaf people cannot function on their own.

Faced with such opposition, the newly appointed president resigned, a Deaf chairperson of the Board of Trustees was appointed and, three days later, the board voted to hire as president, I. King Jordan, the former dean of the College of Arts and Science, a Gallaudet graduate with a Ph.D. in Psychology.

That night, the new president, the chairperson of the Board of Trustees, and the student body president talked about the future of the 2,123-student university. As the three emerged from the president's office, the teary-eyed student body president said, "There was no interpreter." None was needed because for the first time in the school's history, Deaf people held the fate of the nation's only university for the Deaf in their own hands.

During this eight-day protest, Deaf students demanded that the hearing world respect their right to govern their own lives. They showed that deafness is not a disability, but rather the quality that unites Deaf people into a cohesive, vibrant community. At the heart of this community is its language, ASL. This language embodies the thoughts, experiences, traditions, and values shared by the community. Deaf people themselves are poets, carpenters, mechanics, farmers, artists, teachers, ministers, lawyers, business people and journalists. Deaf people have their own community organizations, professional associations, theatres, and churches. And as the hearing world learned, the Deaf community has its own leaders.

A note on terminology. Over the years, different terms have been used to refer to Deaf people. Some older terms are offensive today and should be avoided, especially "deaf and dumb" and "deaf mute." The term "hearing impaired" is often used by public institutions and political groups as an inclusive term to refer to all people with any degree of hearing loss. This term, however, does not distinguish between people with hearing loss and Deaf people. Deaf people, because of their language and cultural identity, prefer to be called "Deaf."

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