

The Development of Sign Languages Around the World

A

Long before the formal recognition of sign languages, deaf individuals around the world found ways to communicate through gesture and expression. These early systems of communication were often created spontaneously and used within families or small communities. However, it was not until the 18th and 19th centuries that structured, codified sign languages began to emerge in educational settings, leading to the development of distinct sign languages across various countries and regions.

B

One of the earliest documented instances of a formal sign language dates back to the 18th century in France. The Abbé de l'Épée, a French educator, recognized the potential of using sign language for teaching deaf students. He studied the signs used by deaf Parisians and began to standardize them, creating what would become known as Old French Sign Language. This laid the groundwork for French Sign Language (LSF), which, through historical connections and missionary efforts, would later influence the development of American Sign Language (ASL) and others.

C

American Sign Language (ASL) developed in the early 19th century when Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, an American clergyman, traveled to Europe to learn methods of teaching the deaf. He brought back Laurent Clerc, a deaf teacher from the Paris Institute for the Deaf, to help establish the first school for the deaf in the United States in 1817. The language that developed among the school's students combined signs brought by Clerc from LSF with indigenous signs used in Martha's Vineyard and other

regions. ASL, therefore, is not a derivative of English but a unique language with its own syntax and grammar.

D

While ASL and LSF share a historical lineage, sign languages around the world are not universally intelligible. British Sign Language (BSL), for instance, evolved independently and is mutually unintelligible with ASL, despite both nations sharing the same spoken language. In fact, BSL is more closely related to Auslan (Australian Sign Language) and New Zealand Sign Language, due to the British colonial influence in those regions. This diversity underscores that sign languages are not merely signed versions of spoken languages but independent linguistic systems that develop within deaf communities.

E

In some cases, unique sign languages have emerged in isolated or rural communities with a high incidence of hereditary deafness. For example, in the village of Adamorobe in Ghana and in certain Bedouin communities in Israel, entire communities, including hearing individuals, use village sign languages. These languages develop organically without formal instruction and often differ significantly from national sign languages. They demonstrate how human beings naturally develop complex communication systems when needed, regardless of whether spoken language is an option.

F

The linguistic study of sign languages gained momentum in the latter half of the 20th century. In 1960, American linguist William Stokoe published groundbreaking research demonstrating that ASL had its own consistent grammatical structure, affirming its status as a bona fide language. Since

then, research into the structure, acquisition, and evolution of sign languages has expanded significantly, reshaping perceptions within both the academic and deaf communities. Sign languages are now recognized not as simplified or pantomimic versions of spoken languages, but as full-fledged languages capable of abstract thought and poetic expression.

G

Today, efforts are being made to preserve and document lesser-known sign languages, many of which are endangered due to the spread of dominant sign languages through education and media. International collaboration has grown, with sign languages increasingly represented in digital media, education, and even official government settings. Some countries, such as New Zealand and Finland, have granted their national sign languages official status, acknowledging the linguistic and cultural rights of their deaf populations.

H

The development of sign languages around the world reveals a universal human capacity for language, regardless of the modality through which it is expressed. It also highlights the rich cultural and linguistic diversity within deaf communities globally. As sign languages gain broader recognition and protection, they serve not only as tools of communication but as powerful symbols of identity, resilience, and linguistic ingenuity.

Questions

Questions 1–4

Matching Information to Paragraphs

Match each of the following pieces of information to the correct paragraph (A–H).

Write the correct letter, A–H, in boxes 1–4 on your answer sheet.

1. A linguist proved that ASL has a complex grammar system.
 2. Sign languages have appeared in places where hereditary deafness is common.
 3. Early attempts to create a standardized sign language for education.
 4. Some countries have given legal status to their sign languages.
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Questions 5–9

Yes / No / Not Given

Do the following statements agree with the views of the writer in the reading passage?

Write YES if the statement agrees with the views of the writer,
NO if the statement contradicts the views of the writer,
NOT GIVEN if it is impossible to say what the writer thinks about this.

5. ASL and BSL are largely similar in grammar and vocabulary.
6. Sign languages are used in some communities even by people who are not deaf.
7. Sign languages are generally based on pantomime and lack abstract elements.

8. Sign languages are easier to learn than spoken languages.
 9. The academic study of sign languages began in the 19th century.
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Questions 10–13

Summary Completion

Complete the summary below using words from the passage.

Choose ONE WORD ONLY from the passage for each answer.

Write your answers in boxes 10–13 on your answer sheet.

Early forms of sign language developed informally in households and small communities. In France, an educator named (10)_____ began the process of standardizing these gestures in the 18th century. Later, American Sign Language emerged when a teacher brought a deaf educator named (11)_____ from Europe to help found a school. Despite sharing a spoken language, sign languages like ASL and BSL are not (12)_____. Research in the 20th century confirmed that ASL is a legitimate language with its own (13)_____.

Answer Key

1. F
2. E
3. B
4. G
5. NO
6. YES
7. NO
8. NOT GIVEN
9. NO
10. l'Épée
11. Clerc
12. intelligible
13. grammar