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ASL: Is It a Language?

 Proving the legitimacy of American Sign Language (ASL) as a distinct language of communication has been an ongoing struggle that has been prevalent in the Deaf community for almost a century. Many believe it is merely a visual form of English, but that is not the case. A common misconception about ASL is that it’s the only form of visual communication; however, many other countries have their own form of signing, including Britain, France, China, Brazil, and many more. Furthermore, the Deaf community in America prefers ASL over oral communication and Signing Exact English (SEE)—a system that aligns with English in the sense that every word has its own sign. Frankly, it is impolite to assume that a deaf individual can read lips well. Taking it into perspective, speaking—to a deaf person—is like listening to a foreign language for the hearing community. ASL, like Spanish, French, and German, is just as valid to be taught at universities and schools. American Sign Language is a legitimate foreign language and should be offered at many schools and universities due to the widespread population of hard-of-hearing individuals.

# The words “foreign language” can be defined as a second, third, or fourth language that is learned in a specific situation where the language is not used widely in the area*. The Chicago Tribune* gives examples of professors and educators who believe that indigenous languages don’t have the requirements to fulfil this “foreign language” definition. Many others believe that languages need documentation and written literature to uphold studies. There is a vast misunderstanding that ASL and the deaf community lack culture, whereas other forms of speaking languages and the groups who speak them do. In the article “Is American Sign Language a ‘foreign’ language?” author Angie Leventis Laurgos interviewed Robert Belka—a former chair of the foreign language department at Weber State University—about his opinion, in which he states, “American Sign Language ‘is not sufficient to sustain culture’”(45). However, contrary to Belka’s statement, ASL indeed *has* an abundance of culture in the form of visual stories, values, and norms passed down from generation to generation. Schools for the deaf further transmit this knowledge into young Deaf minds and introduce those who were born to hearing parents to a positive and welcoming environment.

American Sign Language is a distinct language from spoken English. ASL originated from the first school for the deaf in America. Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc worked together with their students to create what we know as ASL today. Clerc taught French Sign language (LSF) before he was roped in by Gallaudet to establish a school in America. Because of Clerc’s influence, many of the American signs are closely related to LSF. Compared to English, ASL has a completely different method to convey meaning, and Sign Language uses facial expressions to display grammar. Sentences in English do not compare exactly to ASL and vice versa. In the article “American Sign Language is not English on the Hands,” Collin Matthew Belt states, “In spoken English, meaning is produced by a series of words ‘produced by actions within the vocal tract that result in sounds perceived through audition,’ whereas in ASL, meaning is produced by using signs ‘produced by actions of the hands, arms, face, and head that produce signs perceived visually’” (43). This difference allows ASL to show meaning in a vast number of ways that English is unable to achieve. In addition, variances between ASL and spoken English include pluralization, time, syntax, and word order. Pluralization is used when a number is followed by a sign; whereas, in English the noun is followed by an “s.” For example, a signer would sign “I have two dog.” Time is portrayed when words like month and minute are signed, but the signer uses numbers to portray how many. For instance, the sign for *minute* is an extended finger on the non-dominant hand touching the wrist while the dominant hand shows the number for how many minutes. Syntax and word order can be structured differently between English and ASL. An example of this difference is how the English sentence “I am going to the library,” would be “library I go” in sign language since locations are always signed first. Therefore, noticeable distinctions prove that English isn’t expressed in the same ways as American Sign Language.

ASL is a vital form of communication in America for those who have issues hearing and speaking. Around 10,000 children in the United States are born without the ability to hear or signs of minor hearing loss each year and tend to have issues in the speaking world. Most of these children and young adults were born to hearing parents who initially have no idea how to communicate with their child. In the article “Fierce Debate Over Sign-Language Use by Some Deaf Students” author Christina A. Samuels states, “The majority of those parents opt for cochlear implants for their children with severe or profound deafness” (para. 5). It is highly optimistic to assume that a deaf child will successfully learn the listening and speaking skills on the same level as a child who was born hearing. Contrary to the assumptions of some who don’t know the language well, ASL is equal in status to English and other spoken languages. Communication, language, and literacy tend to be more important than learning how to speak, according to the advocates of ASL.

With the combination of about 72 million deaf people worldwide, 80 percent of whom live in developing countries, there are more than 300 different dialects and variations of sign language across the world. There is a “pidgin” form of sign language that is internationally used in instances such as formal meetings and informal social situations amongst travelers and locals. The article “Sign language protects ‘linguistic identity and cultural diversity’ of all users, says UN chief” states that the “pidgin” form is “not as complex as natural sign languages and has a limited lexicon.” About 150,000 people in the United Kingdom use British Sign Language, which has spread to Australia and New Zealand—who have their own sign languages with similarities to each other. French sign language (previously stated) is one of the earliest European sign languages to be accepted by educators. It has influences on ASL, Irish sign language, Brazilian sign language, and Russian sign language. One of the largest used forms of sign language is Chinese sign language, also known as CSL or ZGS. Between 1 million and 20 million Deaf people in China use this to communicate. Unfortunately, the Chinese education system has discouraged this use for around fifty years. Like early America, the Chinese favor the oral approach. The article “A Guide to the Different Types of Sign Language Around the world” by Richard Brooks explains that “more Chinese schools for the deaf have opened in recent years, and Chinese Sign Language is slowly gaining acceptance” (62). A common misconception across the world is that there is only a universal form of sign language, but the information stated here proves that this is not the case.

 The oral method of communicating between the deaf and hearing is part of an ongoing debate. Oralists were opposed to sign language use, and “oralism” is the act of not only teaching oral communication skills but actively defying gestural communication. These oralists believed in evolution and thought that sign language belonged only to those who were lower on the ladder of evolution. At the end of the nineteenth century, some light was slowly being shed on the issue, and many believed, in general, that disabilities should be overcome. Now for this time period, seeing education in a new light was groundbreaking. Nineteenth-century ideals for deaf people included the idea that overcoming the “disability” of being deaf was to use sign language. The article “The Oral vs. Sign Debate” states that oralists still believed that “overcoming… meant attempting to speak and read lips so that they could better keep pace with their ‘normal’ competitors” (Baynton). ASL, and sign language in general, has come a long way through facing hardships regarding acceptance, and now is more accepted than ever.

 When writing about deaf people, their culture, and their language, authors tend to use both deaf (with a lowercase “d”) and Deaf (with an uppercase “D”). This is not a grammatical error by any means. The difference between deaf and Deaf is the status of the individual’s hearing. Those who are deaf (lowercase “d”) are usually not born Deaf and only have partial hearing loss, which sometimes develops into full hearing loss. On the other hand, Deaf people generally are born without being able to hear and don’t speak while they sign. These people prefer ASL as their most prominent form of communication. To reiterate, ASL was created by Deaf people for the use of Deaf people and has its own grammar, vocabulary, and word order. Signing Exact English, alternately, follows English grammar, and is a combination of ASL, altered ASL signs, and newly created English signs. This specific form of sign language is clearer in the sense of what specific item is being talked about, whereas ASL is broader, meaning that one sign could mean multiple things. SEE has specific signs for words like *is, it, am, he, she, this, that,* etc. that ASL does not use. Using SEE in everyday life around those who prefer ASL may not be the best choice. Deaf people created ASL to be different from English, and signing exact English to them is almost like a slap in the face.

 Rizwan Ahmed, better known by his stage name “Riz MC,” is a British Pakistani actor, rapper, and activist who, in the movie *Sound of Metal* about a drummer, ruptures his ear drums and loses his hearing during his career playing with his band. In order to fulfil this role, Ahmed had to learn American Sign Language. His instructor Jeremy Lee Stone decided that the best way to learn ASL was to completely refrain from the use of his voice on the set of *Sound of Metal*. This technique is often used when teaching ASL and has been proven to be highly affective, even though the idea of not speaking is uncomfortable and difficult to maintain. Prohibiting the use of voice as a form of teaching and learning ensured that the film’s Deaf community would be properly represented. The article “Thanks to its Deaf actors, ‘Sound of Metal’ offers an authentic look at Deaf culture,” Stone admits that “for me, as a Deaf person, I have experienced rejection, and I have experienced marginalization” (para. 13). The preservation of the Deaf community in this film was used in ways such as keeping a Deaf director near the hearing director and using someone from that community to call the shots. They also were sure to keep the Deaf actors far enough away from each other in every scene so they had room to sign to one another without colliding. This project has opened the eyes of many and has begun to break down the “barriers between the Deaf community and the entertainment industry” (para. 2).

 Deaf culture, unlike any other culture, does not originate from a single land but is widespread across the world amongst individuals who are hard of hearing. Generations of Deaf people pass down their language and culture to younger generations in order to keep these elements preserved. This culture is based upon its community and the need to enjoy each other’s company. In the article “What is Deaf Culture?” Joanne Cripps says, “Deaf culture exists because Deaf people who are educated at residential Deaf schools develop their own Deaf network once they graduate, to keep in touch with everyone.” Those part of the Deaf Culture celebrate their identities and embrace themselves for who they are. Deaf culture has stories upon stories that are best represented in ASL. Some of these stories include the King Kong story, the Gallaudet and Clerk story, and the Timber story. The King Kong story can only be signed and wouldn’t make sense if it were in English because of the way it is portrayed. In this story, King Kong sees a beautiful woman, so he picks her up. This large gorilla tells her how beautiful she is and ends up saying he wants to marry her. The sign for *marry* is closing the two hands together as if they are holding each other. In this case, King Kong closes his hands around the girl and kills her before he can marry her. The Gallaudet story shows the travels of the boat moving across the ocean, and the Timber story ends in the lumberjack signing “T-I-M-B-E-R” rather than screaming it because a doctor tells the lumberjack that the tree is deaf. None of these stories would contribute the same effect if they were told in English. As such, we can see how Deaf culture is set apart from other cultures because of its unique qualities.

 Following the lead of Southeast Technical Institute in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Augustana University was one of the first schools in SD to adopt an interpreter training program. Augustana had previously been home of an excellent Deaf and Hard of Hearing program, and it only made sense to add an interpreting program with the help of the Communication Service for the Deaf (CSD). Sioux Falls has a growing community of Deaf individuals, and CSD was devoted to assisting Augustana to create and uphold this Sign Language Interpreting program. Tanya Miller—a Deaf assistant ASL Professor in the Sign Language interpreting department—and a few other staff from Augustana have provided information on the topic of interpreting being established at this college. Because of this growing community, CSD’s main goal is to provide “deaf individuals with equal access to services in the community by facilitating communication through the use of interpreters” (Miller). CSD provided Augustana with the funds to implement an ASL Lab and facility in the beginning stages of this transition. Augustana, including CSD and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), “established a baseline curriculum and syllabi… [and] began offering a Sign Language Interpreting Program in the fall of 2006” (Miller). By the end of the 2013-2014 year, the fifth group of graduates received and accomplished a Sign Language Interpreting degree at Augustana University.

 The acceptance of American Sign Language to be considered a true foreign language has been a difficult process. ASL is continuously proven to be separate from English and even Signing Exact English, and it has its own history and a Deaf culture that spreads throughout all seven continents. It is a vital form of communication for many people in the United States and Canada. Most Deaf individuals prefer this visual method over oral or even cochlear implants. ASL needs to be taught in schools and is just as important as Spanish, German, and any other popular languages taught around the country. All in all, American Sign Language is a specific language that is vital for the future of America and the inclusion of Deaf people alike.

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