

ASL Overview

"Contrary to common belief, ASL [American Sign Language] is not derived from any spoken language, nor is it a visual code representing English. It is a unique and distinct language, one that does not depend on speech or sound. ASL has its own grammar, sentence construction, idiomatic usage, slang, style, and regional variations-- the characteristics that define any language."

--The American Sign Language Handshape Dictionary, p.9

Manual Alphabet and fingerspelling

The ASL manual alphabet consists of twenty-six simple one-handed signs which represent the twenty-six letters of the English alphabet. The manual alphabet is used in fingerspelling (words are spelled out letter by letter) and also in conjunction with some signs. For example, the sign for "group" also means "family" when the sign is performed with the hands in the "F" position.

Fingerspelling is most commonly used for proper names and other words for which no widely recognized sign exists. As with any form of sign language, words should be mouthed or spoken to help the observer understand.

Sign Structure

In addition to fingerspelling, ASL uses a system of hand signs accompanied by lip movement, facial expression, and body language which convey whole words and sometimes phrases. Signs are composed of three aspects--the tab, dez, and sig, which stand for tabula, designator, and signation, respectively. Tab refers to a sign's location in the signing space (for example, the forehead), dez indicates the shape or positioning of the hand or hands ("B" hand), and sig explains the action of the sign (palm out, tap forehead twice). The tab, dez, and sig together make up one sign--"firefighter", in this case. Changing just one aspect of a sign, even slightly, can create an entirely new sign. For example, changing the sig of "firefighter" to one sharp tap with the palm facing left yields the sign for "bastard". (Sign Language Structure, p. 39)

Just like English, French, or German, ASL uses nouns, verbs, and their modifiers to form sentences. However, ASL grammar lacks many of the conventions of English grammar, such as importance of word order, use of articles before nouns, and use of the verb "to be". In the latter two instances, omitted words are often mouthed, but it is not considered

incorrect to leave them out entirely. The "to" in verb infinitives is also omitted-- "I want see you," is perfectly correct; the "to" is unnecessary.

Nouns

Nouns in ASL follow many grammatical rules foreign to speakers of English. Adjectives generally follow nouns in ASL (one of few word order rules), a tradition which came from Old French Sign Language, the French system on which much of ASL is based. (Most adjectives still follow nouns in modern French.) Plural nouns are indicated by repeating the sign (reduplication) or quantifying it ("man three", or "man several"). Reduplication can also be used to intensify words, for example "to search long and hard" is formed by reduplicating "search". Body language and facial expression also contribute a great deal to a sign. "Work" can be tedious or enjoyable depending on a signer's bodily expression and the speed with which the sign is performed.

Pronouns

Pronouns are not generally used in ASL, although signs do exist for situations when it is necessary to refer to people. In most cases, a name is fingerspelled once, and then the person in question is pointed to whenever it is necessary to refer to him or her. If the person is not present, the name is fingerspelled, and an empty spot is designated which represents that person. If two people are being discussed, each is represented by a different empty space. (American Sign Language Dictionary CD-ROM)

Verbs

Likewise, ASL verbs lack many of the rules common to English and other languages. Verbs are often closely related to nouns, and may differ only in range and/or reduplication of movement. For example, the signs for "food" and "eat" are nearly identical. The only difference in the two signs is that "food" (the noun) is performed twice, and "eat" (the verb) once. Other examples of this verb/noun pairing are fly/plane and think/mind. (The ASL Handshape Dictionary)

Verb tenses are expressed by modifying words, such as "past", "finish", "not yet", or "tomorrow". Whereas in English we would ask, "Have you ever been to New York?", the ASL phrase has no equivalent for "have been", and translates literally as "Finish touch New York?". Directionality is also used in conjunction with many verbs to express a more complete thought. Verbs such as "give", "meet", or "help", imply direction and can be used to represent subject, verb, and (indirect) object all at once. For example, a signer could offer to help someone by extending the sign for "help" towards that person, or

conversely, ask for help by performing the sign in his own direction. (American Sign Language Dictionary CD-ROM)

Nuances

The short, simple phrases common to ASL and lack of "traditional" English word order might contribute to the myth that ASL is a primitive means of communication, incapable of expressing subtle differences or abstract ideas, but this is not the case. Intensity of color, for example, can be expressed by strengthening the execution of the sign, and by showing an expression of deep concentration. Just as subtle tones in vocal pitch and volume carry meaning in a spoken language, fluent speakers of ASL can detect small variations in a sign's duration, range of motion, and of course, body language which convey subtle meanings.

Special emphasis can also be given to a sign (the equivalent of underlining a word in a written document) by switching the dominant hand with which the sign is performed. For a right-handed person, the right hand is the dominant hand and the left, passive. One-handed signs are performed with only the dominant hand, and two-handed signs often involve the dominant hand performing an action while the passive hand remains relatively still. If a right-handed person uses her left hand (or vice versa), it places special emphasis on that word.

ASL also has a special indication for abbreviations and acronyms. While fingerspelling FBI, for example, a signer would move his hand in a small circle, indicating that the word was an abbreviation and should not be read as a regular word. (American Sign Language Dictionary CD-ROM) These are just some of the seemingly insignificant features that make ASL a complete and complex language, just as inaccessible to the non-speaker as any spoken foreign language would be.