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An Introduction to British Sign Language

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Unconsciously or consciously, many people gesture. Think of a time when you've been in a foreign country where you do not speak the language and you "mime" your way to the toilet or you "moo" like a cow to ask if there is beef in the curry or, my favourite, sticking your hands in the air to autograph your palm whilst smiling and nodding to convince yourself the waiter has understood that you would like the bill. Some of you may later reflect on how your use of "sign language" assisted in such situations. However, this is not the sign language that is used by an estimated 50,000 deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK today.

Although there is written evidence that sign language has been around for hundreds of years in the UK, it wasn't until 1974 that it was acknowledged that sign language in the UK is a language in its own right and was from then onwards known officially as "British Sign Language" which is often abbreviated to BSL. As a result of linguistic research by various universities, it has been found that BSL has its own formal grammatical structure and syntax. In March 2003, the British government recognised BSL as an official language in its own right but BSL is yet to gain the same legal status of other traditional minority languages used in the UK such as Welsh and Gaelic.

It is forgivable for the lay person to think that gesture is sign language as some of these gestures are iconic or natural such as; DRINK (mime drinking from a tumbler) or TELEPHONE (your thumb and little finger extend from your fist to represent you speaking on the phone). However, the use of recognised BSL is much more complex. Not only are the signs important, but in addition there is the use of body language, facial expression, form, pace, location, classifiers and finger-spelling; the positioning on the hands to form the letters of the alphabet.

BSL, like many other languages around the world, follows a topic-comment structure, which means that the sentence is controlled by the "topic" or the important element in the sentence, which is then commented upon. The topic can be the theme, person or object that is the focus of the conversation. The topic is set up at the beginning of the dialogue and is re-established each time the focus or topic is changed. However, the order of British sign language can be varied to emphasise what the topic is. An example would be as follows:

BOY KICK BALL SVO “As for the boy, he kicked the ball”

BALL BOY KICK OSV “As for the ball, the boy kicked it”

KICK BALL BOY VOS “As for kicking the ball, the boy did it”

(S = Subject, V = Verb, O = Object)

Another important part of sign language is the shape and position of the hands forming the signs. This is, in effect, the words, so it is important to present the signs accurately in the same way that spoken words need to be pronounced accurately to be fully understood by the person being spoken to.

A sign is made up of one or two hand shapes combined plus movement and a location on or near the body. As a result we can represent objects or people, describe how we use objects, what people are like or describe the action of an object or a person. With the addition of facial expression and body language in varying degrees to indicate tone, intent, severity or emphasis, sign language becomes a rich and beautiful language, just as English can be when used to its full potential.

By now you will be aware that BSL is a visual language. People use sign language with one or both hands in front of and around their bodies as well as from the top of their head to their waist. This is known as the signing space, which could be described as a photo frame around the person. However, this is not the only use of space within sign language. When a person is signing they also define the physical area in terms of “topographic” and “syntactic” space.

Topographic space recreates a map of the real world so that the signer can describe places and objects as they really are in relation to other things. An example would be the location of a cup on a table in a room that the person is in at that moment in time. If we place these real things elsewhere or do not place them at all, then we are not following one of the grammatical features of BSL and therefore not signing correctly. Another way of using space is syntactic space, which is created from within the language and represents objects that are not really in the space that the signer places them. For example, the signer may be talking about two dogs and they refer to one being on the left side of their signing space and one on their right. It doesn't necessarily mean that's where these dogs are positioned but they are in their own space that can be referred to by pointing to one or the other, as described above. So, in topographic space the referent is at the location whereas in syntactic space the sign placed by the presenter is the location.

Watching children develop their language can be a beautiful and funny experience as they fumble with do's and don'ts; in particular children are told as they are growing up that it's rude to point! However, pointing is an integral part of

sign language and it's used as referencing and does not bear the same connotations of offensiveness as it does in gestural conversing. Sign language users can use pointing to identify people, objects and places and refer back to those items once they are placed in topographic or syntactic space or time. This means that the signs do not need to be constantly repeated but the placement can be simply referred to time and again. Referencing is also used to introduce something new or when a person or object changes action or location to when they were first established.

Thinking geographically brings to mind the differences that exist in spoken language that we encounter in different parts of the UK. Sign language mirrors the English spoken language in that one sign can mean something different depending on where you are. This is known as regional variation or accent and is most prevalent with numbers, colours and days of the week. It is thought that these regional “dialects” probably came about because in the past, deaf people were quite isolated and would have only been exposed to the community local to them and their nuances of BSL. This is plausible bearing in mind that BSL cannot be written in a letter or spoken on the telephone. These differences in dialect would most likely have arisen when deaf children were gathered together in specialist schools for the deaf where signs would have been used informally amongst the children. Upon leaving school, the young adults would continue to use those regional signs with former school friends and alternative signs, or more standard BSL, with people from other areas. Location alone is not the only factor in the creation of variants of BSL as age, gender, ethnic group, social class, religion, sexuality and evolution in both society and technology have all had effects on BSL variation.

Another thing that makes BSL distinct from English and other spoken languages is that it has no tenses as spoken language does with the use of “-ing” and “-ed” for example, but it does have markers to show the past, present and future and also timelines which can be used to show hours, weeks, months and years. As with sign language in general, aspect or intensity in time would be varied with facial expression and also repetition of the sign. The past is usually expressed by using signs that go backwards from the shoulder or arm and future moves forward whereas those elements which are in the present will be signed directly in front of the presenters body.

So, think of yourself as being on a timeline... In the past you may not have known anything about sign language, now you have read this article and in future, when you see people using sign language, you will appreciate that they are using a language which has been formally recognised, has grammar, structure and meaning and is the communication method for tens of thousands of people in the UK.