

CONTINUUM SWITCHING

Signers vary considerably in their ability to move along the continuum between ASL and English. Generally, deaf signers of educated deaf parents tend to have the most flexibility. Furthermore, deaf signers tend to use more ASL-like signing than hearing people; deaf people with deaf parents tend to use more ASL-like signing than deaf people with hearing parents; and people who learned signs before the age of six will use more ASL-like signing than people who learned signs after the age of six. Gallaudet College experience is also an important variable in predicting ASL-like competence. Experience at Gallaudet reduces ASL usage for deaf students with deaf parents and increases it for deaf students with hearing parents.

Signers are greatly influenced in their choice of signing by a number of sociolinguistic factors such as participants, topic, setting, message form, and other characteristics of the ethnography of communication. If the topic is formal, English may be used; if it is informal, ASL probably will be used. A formal setting, like a classroom, will often elicit English-like signing, even from a person who is more comfortable in ASL. The presence of an all-deaf audience would shift signing toward ASL; the introduction of hearing strangers would move the conversation toward English.

These factors are mutually interactive. The combination of topic, participants, setting, and so on, help determine the kind of signing a person will attempt to use. Not all elements are equally weighted; some are more important than others. Until there is more research into the ethnography of communication of signing, it will be impossible to predict the type of signing a specific deaf person will tend to use in a given situation.

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Sign Language Dialects

Sign languages, like spoken languages, vary in vocabulary, phonology (formational structure), and grammar. This variation can depend on a signer's

region, social class, ethnicity, gender, and age, among other factors.

Some type of sociolinguistic variation has been reported for numerous sign languages, such as regional and social variation in British Sign Language; regional, gender, and age variation in French Sign Language; and regional and gender variation in Indian Sign Language. However, the most in-depth research to date on sociolinguistic variation in sign languages has been done on ASL. See SIGN LANGUAGES: British, French, Indian.

The sociolinguistic research on ASL demonstrates that virtually all types of sociolinguistic variation that occur in spoken languages can also occur in sign languages. Before discussing the specifics of sociolinguistic variation in ASL, several phonological and grammatical rules in ASL need to be briefly presented.

PHONOLOGICAL RULES

The Face-Hand rule, the Two-to-One rule, and the Elbow-to-Hand rule, among others, describe how the formational structure of certain signs in systematic ways.

The Face-Hand rule involves signs such as MOVIE, RABBIT, LEMON, COLOR, SILLY, PEACH, PEANUT. Some signers make these signs with one hand on the face, while others make these signs (with the same handshape and movement) in front of the body.

The Two-to-One rule concerns signs like CAT, CHINESE, COW, DEVIL, HORSE, DONKEY, DEER, FAMOUS. Some signers use the historically older variants of these signs made with two hands on the face, while other signers use the newer form of these signs made with one hand on the face.

The Elbow-to-Hand rule relates to signs such as HELP, SUPPORT, FLAG, POOR, PUNISH. Some signers use the historically older variants of these signs made with one hand touching the elbow, while other signers use the newer form of these signs made with one hand touching the other hand.

GRAMMATICAL RULES

The Negative Incorporation rule, the Agent-Beneficiary rule, and the Verb Reduplication rule, among others, describe grammatical variation in ASL.

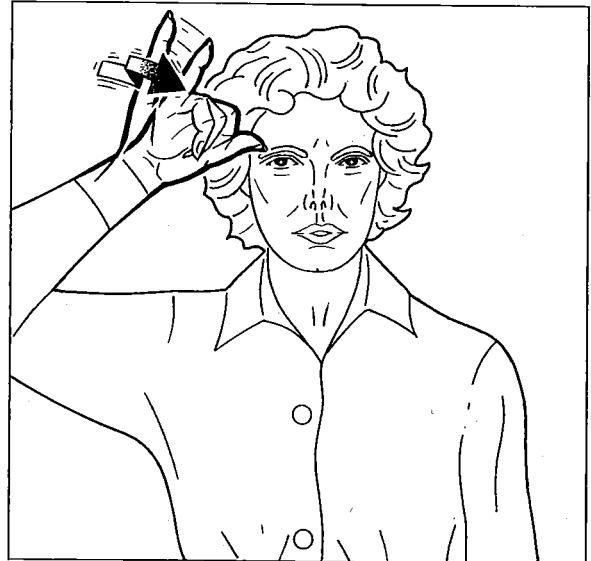
In Negative Incorporation, signers negate a limited set of ASL verbs by using an outward twisting movement of the hand(s) from the place where the sign is made, instead of adding a separate negative sign like NOT. Negative Incorporation may be used with signs such as HAVE, LIKE, WANT, KNOW.

In Agent-Beneficiary Directionality, signers begin movement of the sign in the direction of the agent or actor and end the movement in the direction of



Cow
(older form)

Example of Two-to-One rule. (After C. Baker and D. Cokely, *American Sign Language: A Teacher's Resource Text on*



Cow
(newer form)

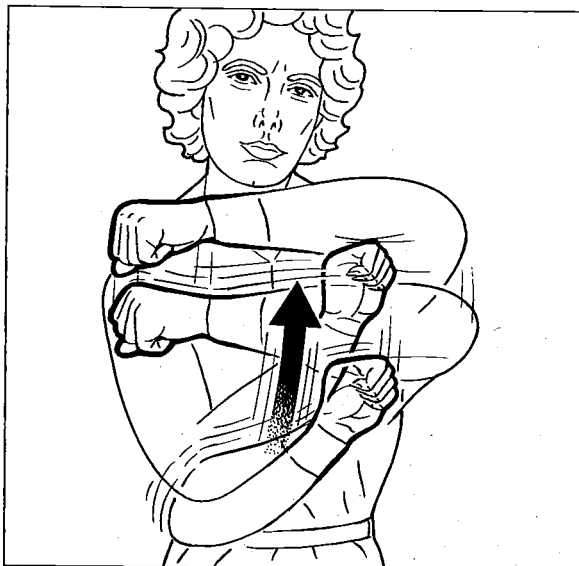
Grammar and Culture, T.J. Publishers, Silver Spring, Maryland, 1980)

the beneficiary or receiver. Agent-Beneficiary Directionality may be used with signs like FINGER-SPELL, HIT, HATE, FORCE, SAY-NO, ASK, TELL, SHOW, GIVE.

In Verb Reduplication, signers repeat the verb to indicate whether the action is continuous or not. Verb Reduplication can be used with signs such as MEET, MEMORIZE, SEE, WANT, STUDY, READ, KNOW, RUN, DRIVE.

REGIONAL VARIATION

There are two types of regional variation in ASL vocabulary: historical (occurring over time) and synchronic (co-occurring during the same time period). Historical variation means that at one time most varieties of ASL used the same sign, while now only certain regions use this form. One example of historical regional variation is the southeastern sign WHAT, which is identical to the com-



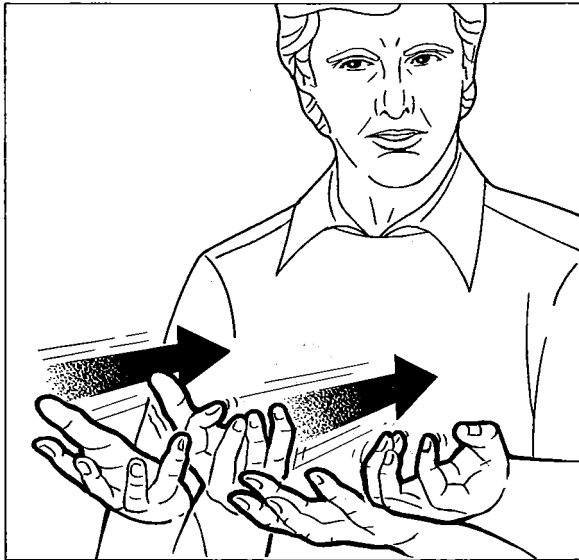
Support
(older form)

Example of Elbow-to-Hand rule. (After C. Baker and D. Cokely, *American Sign Language: A Teacher's Resource*



Support
(newer form)

Text on Grammar and Culture, T.J. Publishers, Silver Spring, Maryland, 1980)



Want

Example of Negative Incorporation rule. (After C. Baker and D. Cokely, *American Sign Language: A Teacher's Re-*



Not want

source Text on Grammar and Culture, T.J. Publishers, Silver Spring, Maryland, 1980)



Me give to you



Me give to him/her



S/He give to me



You give to me



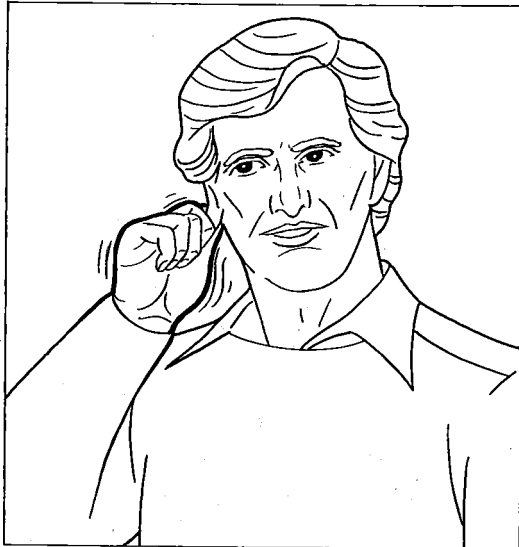
You give to him/her



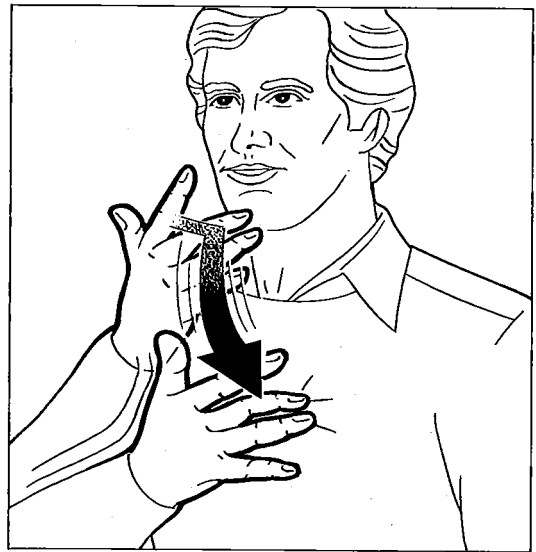
S/He give to you

Example of Agent-Beneficiary Directionality. (After C. Baker and D. Cokely, *American Sign Language: A Teacher's Re-*

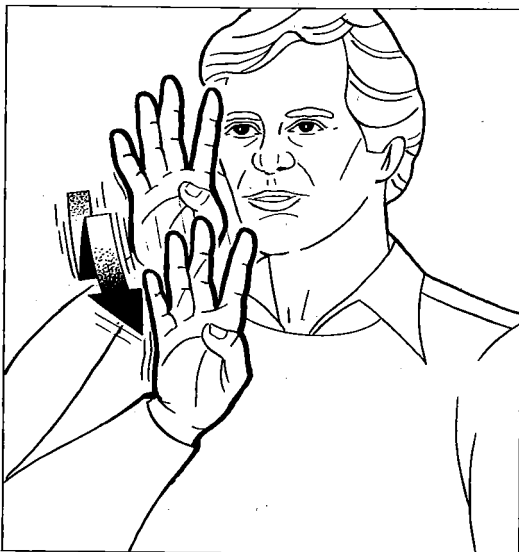
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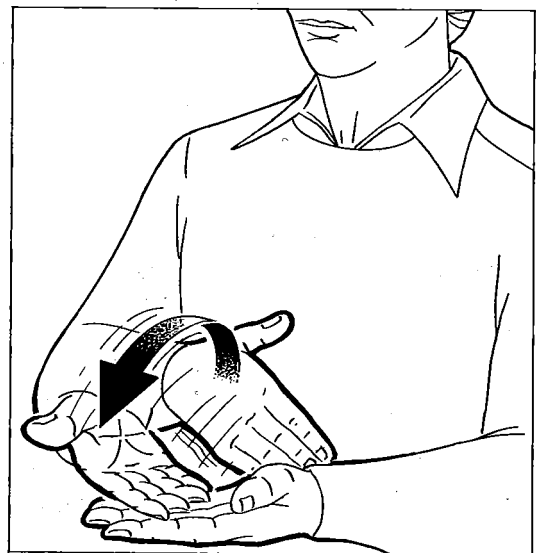
Birthday
(Philadelphia)



Birthday
(Indiana)



Birthday
(Virginia)



Birthday
(more conventional)

Example of regional variants in ASL vocabulary. (After C. Baker and D. Cokely, *American Sign Language: A*

Teacher's Resource Text on Grammar and Culture, T.J. Publishers, Silver Spring, Maryland, 1980)

monly used sign WHERE. Originally, this sign, which is derived from French Sign Language WHAT, was used in many regions of the United States to mean "what." Now only southeastern signers preserve this form for "what," while most signers from other areas use this sign for "where" and use a different sign for "what."

There are numerous synchronic variations in ASL vocabulary according to region. Very common signs such as BIRTHDAY, SHOES, GOAT, HALLOWEEN

have a number of very distinct regional variants that are not formationally related to each other.

Both the Face-to-Hand rule and the Two-to-One rule vary according to region. Signers in Georgia make signs like RABBIT and LEMON significantly more often on the hands than signers from other areas of the country, who tend to make these signs on the face.

Signers in the southeastern part of the United States use significantly more of the historically older

two-handed variants of signs like CHINESE and DONKEY than signers from other areas of the country, who tend to use the more modern one-handed variants of these signs.

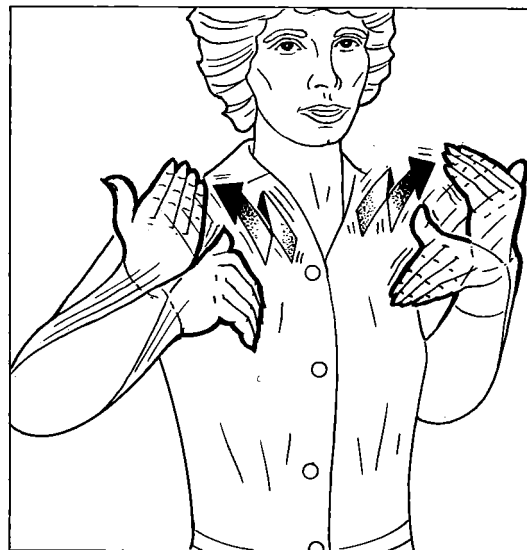
Regional variation in ASL grammar occurs in both the Negative Incorporation rule and the Verb Reduplication rule. Deaf signers from the northwest part of the United States use significantly more ASL Negative Incorporation and ASL Verb Reduplication than deaf signers from the northeastern part of the United States.

ETHNIC VARIATION

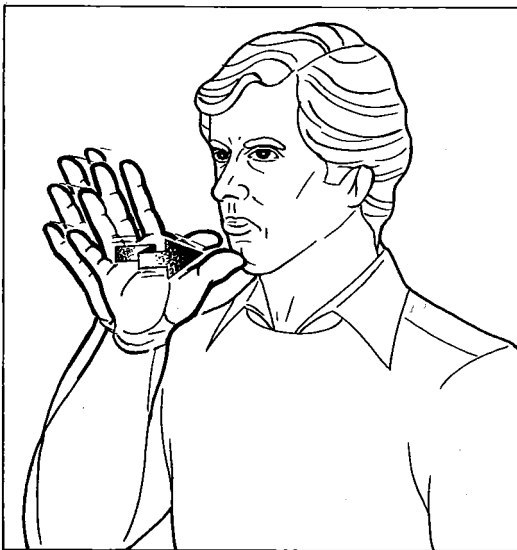
There are examples of historical and synchronic (nonhistorical) variation in black southern signing. One example of historical variation in black southern signing is PREGNANT, which is identical to the commonly used white sign MOTHER. Black signers in Georgia still use this variant of PREGNANT. White signers in Georgia at one time used this sign, but now use the sign common to many other parts of the country that is made with interlocking hands extending from the trunk.



Young
(black southern signers)



Young
(white signers)



Pregnant
(black southern signers)



Pregnant
(white signers)

Example of ethnic variation in ASL vocabulary. (After C. Baker and D. Cokely, *American Sign Language: A*

Teacher's Resource Text on Grammar and Culture, T.J. Publishers, Silver Spring, Maryland, 1980)

Synchronic variation in black southern signing is more common than historical variation, probably because of the long separation of black and white schools in the South. Examples of synchronic variation among black signers in Georgia include SHOELACE, TRUCK, ZIPPER, WHITE-PERSON, among many others. WHITE-PERSON is a particularly interesting sign because it is used in Georgia only by uneducated black signers, but it is also used by some black signers in Louisiana and on the eastern shore of Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware. This suggests that there may be similarities in certain black signs in a number of southern states.

Both the Face-to-Hand rule and the Two-to-One rule vary according to the signer's ethnicity. Black southern signers use hand variants of signs like RABBIT, COLOR, SILLY significantly more often than white southern and white nonsouthern signers who tend to use more of the face variants of these signs. In fact, the hand variant of SILLY is only used by blacks; no whites have ever been noted to use that variant. Blacks in Georgia use significantly more of the historically older two-handed variants of signs like CHINESE and DONKEY than white signers from Georgia.

At present there are no empirical studies of ethnic variation in grammar. The problems in gathering sufficient syntactic data are enormous, because the only researchers who have done systematic investigations in ethnic variation in ASL have been hearing persons. Almost all of these hearing investigators have also been white. Black southern signers attempt to use more English-like signing when in contact with hearing people and attempt to use more white signing in conversations with outsiders. (The phonology and vocabulary of black southern signing do not change as much as grammar does with outsiders.)

SOCIAL VARIATION

More highly educated signers tend to use more borrowings from English in their ASL. These borrowings may be either through fingerspelling an English word or through an initialized sign, such as a native ASL sign that is modified by using a handshape to represent the first letter of an English word. For example, many ASL signers use the sign meaning "a limited kind of enclosure" (often glossed as BOX) to translate the English words "box" and "room." Some more educated signers use this sign only to mean "box," while they use the same sign with R handshapes (index and midfingers extended and crossed) to mean "room." Gradually, initialized signs change in form to conform to various phonological constraints in ASL.

There have been no studies to date that show a relation between signs and social class.

Negative Incorporation, Agent-Beneficiary Directionality, and Verb Reduplication all vary according to the social class background of the signer. Deaf signers use these rules more frequently than hearing signers. Signers who learned signs before the age of six (a crucial time for first language acquisition) use Agent-Beneficiary Directionality and Verb Reduplication more than signers who learned signs after the age of six. Signers who have deaf parents use Verb Reduplication more than signers who have hearing parents.

GENDER VARIATION

While variation due to gender differences occurs in many languages, there are only a few such variations in the vocabulary of ASL. One of these occurs in greeting behavior. Both males and females can use the standard sign HELLO, made with a B handshape extending outward from the side of the forehead. However, there is another sign for "hello" made with an A handshape that tends to be used only by men when greeting men they know. Women know this sign but rarely use it.

The Elbow-to-Hand rule varies according to the signer's gender. Males in the United States tend to use the newer hand form of signs like HELP and SUPPORT more frequently than females, who tend to use the older elbow form more frequently. The Elbow-to-Hand rule, which also occurs in French Sign Language, exhibited the same gender patterning for French signers.

The Agent-Beneficiary rule varies due to gender. In the northwestern United States, males use significantly more of the ASL Agent-Beneficiary rule as compared with females. No male-female differences in grammar have been found in the northeastern United States.

AGE VARIATION

There are very few documented examples of variation in ASL vocabulary due to age. One example is the older sign for TELEPHONE made with two S handshapes. Used only rarely, this sign is used primarily by older signers.

The Two-to-One rule varies according to the signer's age. Older white signers in the South used significantly more of the older two-handed variants of signs like CAT and COW than younger white signers in the same regions of the South.

Variation in the order of adjectives and nouns in ASL seems to be related to age. The shift from older Noun-Adjective word order to Adjective-Noun word order seems to occur more frequently among younger signers, especially those who are white, middle class, and college-educated.

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Language Attitudes

Language attitudes are complex. Within the deaf community several questions need to be considered. For example, what are the attitudes of deaf and hearing people toward English and toward American Sign Language (ASL)? How do deaf people feel about hearing people who use ASL or deaf people who use "English-like signing"? How do hearing people feel about deaf people who use ASL as opposed to those who use English-like signing? The answers to these questions are deeply rooted in the history of the education of deaf children and in the culture of deaf people. Before examining them, it is important to review basic information about languages and cultures in the deaf community.

BACKGROUND

Two languages—ASL and English—are used in the deaf community, and deaf people are skilled in each to varying degrees. These languages serve different functions in the deaf community. In general, deaf people use ASL to communicate with each other and use English to communicate with hearing people (via writing, speech, or English-like signing). Deaf people are used to adapting to the communication skills of other deaf and hearing people. Thus, many can switch to more ASL-like or more English-like signing, depending on the skills of the other people involved.

Language is one aspect of culture. ASL is usually associated with deaf culture and English with the culture of hearing people. Although people who are born deaf to deaf parents may develop skills in both languages, they often are members of deaf culture only. Still, there is much variation in the language skills and cultural identities of deaf people because of differences in schooling or in family backgrounds.

SPEECH STUDIES

Most people are not aware that they judge others according to the way they speak, write, or sign. Often their positive or negative evaluations are based on the status of a language variety in their country or on the political views of people who are known to use a language variety. Similarly, the stereotypes of various cultural groups influence people's attitudes when they hear or see the language associated with a particular group.

The classic attitude is that one's own language is better than all other languages. For example, most Americans believe that English is the best language in the world, while many French people think that French, especially Parisian French, is the world's most artful and elevated language.

People who study language attitudes often audio-tape brief speech samples of people from different social classes or occupations, or from different cultural or ethnic groups. Or, they audio-tape the same people speaking more than one language. Listeners are asked to identify those speech samples with different social classes, occupations, cultural or ethnic groups, or personality traits.

Four general categories of conclusions derive from these studies of language attitudes: (1) Listeners tend to associate certain speech features with a particular race or class status (lower, middle, upper). For example, listeners tend to associate the speech feature "ain't" with the lower class and "aren't" with the middle or higher class. (2) Listeners judge personality characteristics, based on speech, that people associate with different cultural or ethnic groups. For example, they tend to use adjectives like "intelligent" to describe people who speak the language of the majority and adjectives like "less intelligent" to people who speak a minority language. (3) Listeners associate particular occupations with people who speak in certain characteristic ways. For example, they believe that they can tell if the speaker is a college professor or taxi driver by the way the person talks on the audio-tape. (4) Teachers evaluate children's background from their speech characteristics. For example, if a black child talks in black dialect on the audio-tape, teachers often judge the speaker as "disadvantaged."

This research on the language attitudes of hearing people shows how prevalent and strong language attitudes are. This, in turn, can help in understanding deaf and hearing people's attitudes toward ASL and English and the people who use these languages.

DEAF COMMUNITY

Ambivalence is a key word in understanding the language attitudes of deaf people. Deaf people have conflicting feelings toward both ASL and English.