

Signstation – Question and Answers
(<http://www.signstation.org/>)

Q&A British Sign Language

So what is this sign language?

British Sign Language (BSL) is the language used by Deaf people in the UK. It is a language of the hands, body and face and it uses space in order to convey meaning. It is a highly visual language and it has developed over many hundreds of years to meet the needs of Deaf people when they interact with each other.

Is it just like English on the hands?

Not really, it has a completely different structure to English – that is, the grammar is different and the way the signs are constructed is different.

So it is more like gesture?

No, if it were just gesture, then everyone would understand it – since we can all gesture to each other. Most people do not understand Deaf people when they are using BSL.

It seems quite limited – there is only so much you can point to with your hands.

It is just as complex and rich as English – we haven't yet been able to count all the signs in BSL but there is no limit to the expression of meaning and new signs are constructed all the time.

Well, sometimes it is possible to understand some signs like tea or table – so it must be based on pictures?

BSL has a much stronger link to the visual world; so more signs are what we call *iconic* – they represent objects as they are seen and events as they are experienced. It is a visual language. Then again, English uses a lot of sound pictures in its words – like thump, crash, bang, scream, dribble and so on. Most languages have a relation to the things people see or hear.

Does that mean all signs have to be related to visual pictures?

No not at all. There are many signs in BSL which seem to have no relation to the way things look.

There is something called fingerspelling which boy scouts and girl guides learn – is that sign language?

Deaf people use fingerspelling – a way to represent the letters of English on the hands. This is quite old – we know of it at least 300 years ago. It is used to spell out people's

names or place names. Sometimes, it is a way to borrow meaning from English – for example, S-M is used to mean supermarket.

So is sign language the same all over the world?

Yes and no. Yes, sign languages are more similar to each other than spoken languages are, but no, each one has its own vocabulary and expression. Sign languages (like spoken languages) grew up to meet the requirements of the culture and so Chinese Sign Language is very different in concepts and individual signs to British Sign Language. There are families of sign languages, so French Sign Language and American Sign Language are related and British and Australian Sign Language are very close. We can usually say that the grammars of the different sign languages are similar but the vocabularies are quite different.

So all Deaf people use sign language?

This turns out to be quite a complex question. By definition, Deaf people are those who use sign language. However, their access to it is often quite different to the way that hearing people learn and use spoken language. This occurs because most (90%) of Deaf children are born into hearing families – most of whom have never experienced sign language. Deaf infants and often young children may not see sign language until they are four or five years old and even in some cases, later. This situation is changing as people become more aware of sign language on television and so on – but there are many people who have a hearing loss who have not learned sign language.

Elderly people or people who have a sudden hearing loss, will seldom use sign language. You will also come across other people who say they are deaf but whose hearing loss is not so great – partially hearing or hard-of-hearing – they are unlikely to use sign language.

People in the Deaf community, children whose parents are Deaf, people who went to a Deaf school are the main users of sign language.

So is sign language pretty much fixed in time?

It changes and evolves just like any language. Although we did not have video cameras 50 and 100 years ago, we do have descriptions and we can make comparisons.

We find that many signs change their position in space - so POLICE has moved down from the upper arm (showing the policeman's stripes) to the wrist, PERHAPS has moved down from near the head to right in front of the body.

We find some signs changing from two handed to one handed – FISH, LIVE, and SCHOOL are now more commonly seen as one-handed.

Is BSL the same all over the UK?

There are variations. These are usually to do with single signs being different – the structure of the language remains the same. Since there are many different words in use in English in different parts of the country, we should not be surprised at this. Some Deaf

people will point them out and insist on the local variety of signing but it should be possible most of the time to be understood even if you use a different variety.

Sign language is a rich and complex language which we are only slowly studying and understanding.

©Centre for Deaf Studies 2005. All rights reserved.