

- **Signed and spoken languages — Similarities and differences**
- **Iconicity in language**

Background preparation:

- *Kaplan (2016), Ch 3, “Sign language is skilled charades”, sec 3.1–3.2*

1. Some sign language basics

Kaplan (2016: 32)

• Comments?

...most hearing people don't personally know anyone who is deaf and have no first-hand experience with signing. In this context, there are two very interesting widespread beliefs about the nature of sign:

1. Signing is a visual representation of the surrounding spoken language. People who know ASL are signing 'in English'; people who know French Sign Language are signing 'in French', and so on.
2. Sign is a universal language, because it's basically pantomime that draws pictures in the air.

1. Some sign language basics

How are signed languages from around the world related to each other? Some examples:

- American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL) are distinct
 - ASL developed from French Sign Language
 - BSL gave rise to Auslan (Australia) and NZSL
- Swedish Sign Language and Portuguese Sign Language (LSP) are closely related
 - Swedish schools for Deaf established in Lisbon, Oporto
- [Map](#) of many signed languages (Gallaudet U. Press)

1. Some sign language basics

- Some conventions:

- Kaplan (2016: 37, footnote 4)

‘Deaf’ with a capital ‘D’ refers to the distinct community and culture with which many deaf individuals identify themselves; ‘deaf’ with a small ‘d’ refers to the physical condition of deafness.

- In written descriptions of signed languages, a written-language word in CAPITAL LETTERS is often used to represent a particular sign

1. Some sign language basics

- Evidence that signed languages are not “translations” of the spoken languages around them

1. Some sign language basics

- Evidence that signed languages are not “translations” of the spoken languages around them
 - The **word order** is often different
 - **Vocabulary** does not correspond one-to-one
 - Words borrowed from spoken languages into signed languages can **diverge** in meaning from the source (note: this is typical for borrowed words between spoken languages also)

1. Some sign language basics

- If signed languages are in fact human languages, what predictions can we make about ways in which they are similar to and different from spoken lgs?

1. Some sign language basics

- If signed languages are in fact human languages, what predictions can we make about ways in which they are similar to and different from spoken lgs?

Similarities:

- Many characteristics that we see in signed languages should be found in spoken languages
- Signed languages should be subject to universal limits on possible rules of language
- Language acquisition and language disorders should show similarities

1. Some sign language basics

- If signed languages are in fact human languages, what predictions can we make about ways in which they are similar to and different from spoken lgs?

Differences:

- The visual, rather than auditory, modality might give rise to certain systematic differences

2. Signed and spoken languages — Similarities

- ASL is different from English, but many of its properties can be found in other spoken languages
 - Distinction between *you*.SINGULAR and *you*.PLURAL in ASL is like that found in ...
 - Lack of distinction between *he* and *she* is like that found in Mandarin or Turkish [[WALS map](#)]
 - ASL verbs show **aspect** (completion, continuation, repetition, ...) but not **tense** (past, future); this is also like Mandarin
[[WALS map](#) (perfective/imperf. aspect vs. past tense)]
- Examples of [ASL verbs inflected for aspect](#)

2. Signed and spoken languages — Similarities

- Language acquisition
 - Children acquiring a signed language go through similar developmental stages as children acquiring a spoken language
 - Examples of [ASL babbling to early words to words](#) (start at 0:50 for BEAR, MOTHER)

2. Signed and spoken languages — Similarities

- Psycholinguistics
 - Signed languages are processed in the language areas of the brain, not the areas for non-language visual/spatial processing
 - Damage to the language-processing areas of the brain results in language impairments for signers (and damage to the visual-spatial areas does not)

3. Signed and spoken languages — Differences

- The fact that signed languages use a **visual modality** while spoken languages use an auditory modality can potentially lead to differences between the two systems
 - Use of **pronouns/referents** in discourse
 - What is '**phonology**' like with no sound?

3. Signed and spoken languages — Differences

- Use of pronouns/referents in discourse: examples
 - [Indexing and personal pronouns in ASL](#)
(lifeprint.com)
 - [Establishing a discourse referent in ASL](#)
(Jolanta Lapiak at HandSpeak)

3. Signed and spoken languages — Differences

- In spoken-language phonology, speech sounds (consonants and vowels) are mentally classified in terms of **phonological features** — properties related to their physical articulation or acoustics
 - *voiced*: do the vocal folds buzz?
 - *nasal*: is there airflow through the nose?
 - *labial*: is the sound articulated with the lips?
- These phonological features are often considered **universal** building blocks of phonology
 - But what about signed languages?

3. Signed and spoken languages — Differences

- The current view: Signed languages also have **phonological features**
 - Individual signs can be broken down into a finite set of characteristics that don't carry meaning but can be used to classify signs

3. Signed and spoken languages — Differences

- The first systematic analysis (ASL; Stokoe 1960) proposed three classes of **phonological features**
 - Note: William Stokoe's name is pronounced /stowki/*
 - Location - Handshape - Movement
- Later scholars have introduced further features
 - Orientation
 - Non-manual features (eyebrows, head-shake, etc.)
- Two signs in a signed language can be a **minimal pair** — differing in just one feature
[ASL MOTHER VS. FATHER OR MOTHER VS. GRANDMOTHER]

4. Iconicity

- What does it mean to say that a sign is **iconic**?

4. Iconicity

Kaplan (2016: 40):

A sign is iconic if the form of the sign is related to the idea it describes.

- Watch the first few minutes of the book trailer for [The Gallaudet Children's Dictionary of American Sign Language](#) (YouTube link)
 - Which of these signs seem iconic to you?

ACT

CAR

BEAUTIFUL

CAT

CANDY

EARTH

4. Iconicity

Kaplan (2016: 40):

A sign is iconic if the form of the sign is related to the idea it describes.

- Questions for discussion:
 - Are signs in signed languages always iconic?
 - Are words in spoken languages ever iconic?

4. Iconicity

- Examples of signs meaning YESTERDAY
 - [ASL](#) (HandSpeak)
 - [Chinese Sign Language](#) (ChineseSignLanguage.com)
- To consider:
 - Do these signs seem to be iconic?
 - Are they identical?
 - Would you understand them if you didn't know their meaning ahead of time?

4. Iconicity

- What iconic does **not** mean:
 - The same in all languages
 - Understood without context
 - Unambiguous
- Iconic words in spoken languages illustrate these points well! — onomatopoeia | Discussion?
 - Words for animal sounds
 - Words for noises/sound effects
- Bonus link: Evidence for iconicity in Pokémon names ([research by S. Kawahara and colleagues](#))

4. Iconicity

- *Arbitrariness of the sign* (Saussure): the idea that there is no necessary relationship between the form (sound, shape) of a word and its meaning
 - Iconic signs/words are exceptions to this
 - However, iconic signs/words are usually *also* at least partly arbitrary
 - What evidence that we have already discussed today helps make this point?
- More about iconicity in the case-studies next time

5. Some examples — Words/sentences in ASL

- Examples from the book trailer for [The Gallaudet Children's Dictionary of American Sign Language](#) (YouTube)

(1) *car* (0:17) | *Last Saturday we washed the car.*

- In the English sentence, the word *car* is last in the sentence. Is it last in the ASL sentence?

5. Some examples — Words/sentences in ASL

- Examples from the book trailer for *The Gallaudet Children's Dictionary of American Sign Language* (YouTube)

(2) *cat* (0:35) | *This cat is afraid of a little mouse.*

- How does the position of the word *cat* differ in the ASL and English sentences? How about *mouse*?
- Note the way the signer is pointing during the utterance of this sentence. What linguistic feature of ASL is illustrated here?

5. Some examples — Words/sentences in ASL

- Video: [“Safe Partying Tips from Gallaudet University”](#) (YouTube)
 - Can you see (possible) examples of verb aspect morphology?
 - Can you see any use of discourse referents?