

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

Background preparation:

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

0. Today's objectives

After today's class, you should be able to:

- **Prepare for class discussion** on a background discussion day for a myth from the Kaplan book
- Describe, and give examples, of ways that signed languages are **similar** to, and **different** from, spoken languages
- Explain the concept of **iconicity** in language and compare it to **universality** and **arbitrariness**
 - Give examples of iconic and arbitrary aspects of signed and spoken languages

0. Preparing for myth background days

Follow these guidelines unless otherwise indicated:

- One Kaplan chapter will be the assigned reading
 - This will come with prep questions
- In the **background/discussion** sections, focus on
 - What is the **myth**?
 - What are the **key ideas** from linguistics or cognitive science that Kaplan presents?

0. Preparing for myth background days

- We will spend less time on Kaplan's **case studies**
 - Instead, **group presentations** will provide **updated** case studies!
 - Midterm exam questions on case studies will come from the group presentations
- Use Kaplan's case-study sections to practice...
 - Parsing and interpreting any **data graphics**
 - Understanding the structure of any **data tables**
 - **Relating** these to the **BP and measurable RQs** (as summarized in Kaplan's discussion)

1. Some sign language basics

Warm-up

Kaplan (2016: 32)

...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.

- Comments? Are these two views compatible? Is either view accurate?

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
- ~ September is National Deaf Awareness Month in the US ~

1. Some sign language basics

Discussion

- What is some evidence Kaplan presents to make the case that signed languages are not just “translations” of spoken languages around them?

1. Some sign language basics

- What is some evidence Kaplan presents to make the case that signed languages are not just “translations” of 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
- Language acquisition, language processing, 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

- Many **characteristics** of ASL that are different from English 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](#) (perf./imperf. **aspect** vs. pres./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

- **Language processing** (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
 - Bonus topic (not in reading):
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

Discussion

- What does it mean to say that a sign is **iconic**?
- Are iconic signs universally understood?

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.

- **Discussion**

- Are signs in **signed** languages **always iconic**?
- Are words in **spoken** languages **ever iconic**?

4. Iconicity

- Examples of signs meaning YESTERDAY
 - [ASL](#) (HandSpeak)
 - [other example link is broken!]
- 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?
- The case studies in Ch 3 focus on iconicity

5. Some examples — Words/sentences in ASL

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

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)

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 ...

- Negation?
- Discourse referents/pronouns?
- Verb aspect?