The wonders of British Sign Language

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What is British Sign Language?

It’s the first or preferred language of the Deaf community

It’s one of the biggest, most widely used languages in Britain: estimates of 87,000-151,000 users

A language with a long history: but unlike spoken/written languages, not well documented

9/10 Deaf people are born to hearing parents

A short history of BSL
How do we know about the history of spoken languages?
Marriage Register of St Martin’s, Leicester, 1576

Thomas Tillsye and Ursula Russel were marryed: and because the sayde Thomas was and is naturally deafe and also dumbe, so that the order of the forme of marriage used usually amongst others which can heare and speake could not for his parte be observed … the sayde Thomas, for the expression of his minde instead of words, of his own accorde used these signs…

First he embraced her with his armes, and took her by the hande, putt a ring upon her finger and layde his hande upon her harte, and held his hands towards heaven; and to show his continuance to dwell with her to his lyves ende he did it by closing of his eyes with his hands and digging out of the earthe with his foote, and pulling as though he would ring a bell with divers other signs approved.
Chirologia, or the naturall language of the hand. Composed of the speaking motions, and discoursing gestures thereof, by John Bulwer 1644.

https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bslhistory
• **1760**: Thomas Braidwood’s School for the Deaf in Edinburgh, then one in London. Focus on BSL and English.

• Industrial Revolution.

• **1870**: 22 schools for deaf children in Britain. Mostly residential, Deaf staff, focus on reading and writing English, instruction in BSL.
Milan 1880

- Second international conference on the education of the deaf
- 164 delegates, of whom 1 Deaf

Delegates to the 2nd International Conference of Education of the Deaf
The Convention, considering the incontestable superiority of articulation over signs in restoring the deaf-mute to society and giving him a fuller knowledge of language, declares that the oral method should be preferred to that of signs in education and the instruction of deaf-mutes.

The Convention, considering that the simultaneous use of articulation and signs has the disadvantage of injuring articulation and lip-reading and the precision of ideas, declares that the pure oral method should be preferred.
Disastrous and long-lasting consequences for Deaf people

http://nancyrourke.com
Some milestones in BSL

• **1960s**: greater political awareness

• **1970s**: sign languages understood as real languages

• **1980**: Regular TV broadcasts in BSL

• **1992**: BSL dictionary

• **March 2003**: Recognition of BSL by UK government

• Current campaigns: access to information and services; supporting families, GCSE in BSL.
Overview: the linguistics of BSL

- **Vocabulary** is often **visually motivated** and the language has principles for making novel signs.

- **Grammar** exploits **placement** in and **movement** through space.

- Hands, face and body can be used simultaneously.

- These things mean that the word (sign) structure and sentence structure are **not like English**!
Visual motivation

- **Visual motivation**: signs that somehow resemble, illustrate, or portray something about the thing they represent are said to be **visually motivated**

- **Auditory motivation** is more limited in spoken languages: e.g. the cow *mooed*; the cat *purred*; ding-dong!

- Visual motivation is complex…. let’s look!

moo!
WHY (no visual motivation)
There are different kinds of visual motivation, from ‘very obvious’ through ‘ah, now I see it!’ to none. Visual motivation is a rich resource for new signs.
Placement and movement

Sign: HELP  \text{A→B}

An ‘agreement’ verb.

There’s no ‘he’ or ‘she’! Instead, there are locations.
“Gold coins”

• Let’s watch this joke together

• What do you think it’s about?
“Gold coins”

Non-BSL people:

What do you think the story was about?
“Gold coins”

• Look again! Notice…

  • the signer “is” the farmer looking around (handshape:✌ for eyes)
  • he locates where the new fence is going to go (handshape: ☞ to point)
  • he locates the fence posts and puts them in (handshape: big-C to hold a big thing)
  • he traces the holes for the fence, and the one in his pocket (handshape: ☞ to trace thin things)
  • he picks up the coin and cleans it (handshape: closed-👌 to hold little things)

• How does he sign ‘fall’? How do you think that changes the meaning?
BSL grammar

- Placement, handshape, “being” someone else, changing the way signs are made — built into the grammar of sign languages

- You have to know where things are, how they move, how you hold them, what shape they are...

Role shift in ASL: Lillo-Martin (2012)
Grammars of languages...

French: la chaise (feminine)
German: der Stuhl (masculine)

• Most Indo-European languages mark gender: masculine, feminine, sometimes also neuter

• Other spoken languages may see the world differently: Swahili includes shape, size

• Sign languages use location; also shape, size, how something is held, how it moves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Class Prefix</th>
<th>Example Word</th>
<th>Concord (Subject, Object)</th>
<th>Referential Concord</th>
<th>Possessive Concord</th>
<th>‘Meaning’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>mtu ‘person’</td>
<td>a/yu</td>
<td>ye</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td>People</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td>watu ‘people’</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>mti ‘tree’</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>wa</td>
<td>Trees, plants</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>mi</td>
<td>mti ‘trees’</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>yo</td>
<td>ya</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>ji/∅</td>
<td>jicho ‘eye’</td>
<td>li</td>
<td>lo</td>
<td>la</td>
<td>Round things, liquids, masses, augmentatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>ma</td>
<td>macho ‘eyes’</td>
<td>ya</td>
<td>yo</td>
<td>ya</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>ki</td>
<td>kiti ‘chair’</td>
<td>ki</td>
<td>cho</td>
<td>cha</td>
<td>Artefacts, tools, manner, diminutives</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>vi</td>
<td>viti ‘chairs’</td>
<td>vi</td>
<td>vyo</td>
<td>vya</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>n/∅</td>
<td>ndege ‘bird’</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>yo</td>
<td>ya</td>
<td>Animals, loanwords</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>n/∅</td>
<td>ndege ‘birds’</td>
<td>zi</td>
<td>zo</td>
<td>za</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>ubao ‘board’</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>wa</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>ku</td>
<td>kuumba ‘to sing’</td>
<td>ku</td>
<td>ko</td>
<td>kwa</td>
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<td>(pa)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pa</td>
<td>pa</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>(ku)</td>
<td>mahali ‘place’</td>
<td>ku</td>
<td>ko</td>
<td>kwa</td>
<td>Locatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>(mu)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>m</td>
<td>mo</td>
<td>mwa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Signing several things at once

English: one after the other

it was raining

it was raining hard

BSL: at the same time

hands: RAINING

face: puffed cheeks, narrow eyes

Waving at a friend while walking the dog
Translating into BSL

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

For each item, please mark the box for Not True, Somewhat True or Certainly True. It would help us if you answered all items as best you can even if you are not absolutely certain or the item seems daft! Please give your answers on the basis of the child's behaviour over the last six months or this school year.

Child's Name .................................................................................................................................

Date of Birth....................................................................................................................................

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not True</th>
<th>Somewhat True</th>
<th>Certainly True</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Considerate of other people's feelings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often complains of headaches, stomach-aches or sickness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares readily with other children (treats, toys, pencils etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often has temper tantrums or hot tempers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Parent/Teacher/Other (please specify:)

Signature ........................................................................................................................................
Restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long
BSL is a rich language with its own history, and its own cultural setting.

BSL has a complex grammar that uses the hands, face and body in time and space: it is not “English on the hands”.

Access to information and services for Deaf people remains poor. Linguistic rights are human rights!
Thank you!

Special thanks to:

The Department of Language & Linguistic Science, for time to learn BSL
Colleagues at DCAL
Students for their helpful feedback
My endlessly patient BSL teachers and Deaf colleagues