

Chapter 1

What is ASL?



American Sign Language (also called ASL or, inaccurately, "Ameslan") is not "bad English," "broken English," "short English," or *any* kind of English. Nor is it Morse Code, or fingerspelling, or pantomime. ASL is a unique language with its own grammatical rules and syntax (sentence structure), and is every bit as precise, versatile, and subtle as English. In some ways, it's even more so.

It's easy enough to describe what ASL isn't. But there is no satisfactory definition of exactly what ASL *is*. Some Deaf people maintain that there can be no universally acceptable, satisfactory-to-all definition of ASL; others claim that there is (or can be). This is a subject of some controversy. Where to draw the line between what's acceptable and unacceptable ASL? Every user seems to have a different opinion!

ASL has evolved from a blend of Old French Sign Language and what's now called "Old American Sign Language," which has been traced to the "dialect" used in the communities of Chilmark and West Tisbury on Martha's Vineyard. Some sort of native sign language was being used well over a century before Laurent Clerc brought French Sign Language to the States in 1817.* ASL, in other words, is a hybrid of FSL and an indigenous sign language. Many ASL signs were borrowed from FSL, but some have always been "American."

At any rate, ASL has developed quite independently of English. Its structure and vocabulary owe nothing to English, or to British Sign Language. Just like any other modern, living and ever-changing language, ASL con-

tinues to evolve. Iconic (pictorial or mime-like) signs gradually become more abstract, more arbitrary. New signs are gradually introduced; old signs are altered or dropped. ASL possesses regional variations (dialects), slang, and fad expressions. There are also puns, word-play (like handshape-rhymes), and plenty of creative humor.

ASL has been the precious heritage of the Deaf community, whose users have nonetheless suffered from widespread prejudice in the Hearing world. Not so long ago, Deaf children were discouraged (if not *prohibited*) from using ASL even in schools for the deaf, and adults were ashamed to be seen Signing in public. They were made to feel that ASL was strictly inferior to English, and communicating in Sign was not socially acceptable. (Some “well-meaning” hearing teachers considered it “animal-like.”). Happily, we’ve made progress against such destructively ignorant attitudes, but sentiment against ASL still exists, and deaf children still are discouraged from making ASL their first language.

Linguists have only recently begun to pay serious attention to ASL as a language, but ASL has already begun to enrich American culture through theatre, poetry, song, Sign Mime, and storytelling. A new ASL literature-on-videotape is in the making. Even to those who don’t understand it, ASL can be enthralling to watch. Its popularity is steadily increasing, and it has been (arguably) labeled the third most widely-used language in the United States. ASL is a beautiful and expressive language that is finally beginning to get the respect it deserves.

Did you know that...

—people using ASL can communicate comfortably with each other across a football field—much farther

than the loudest shout can carry!?

—Sign Language is so handy it’s used in underwater communication?

—while whispering can be picked up by microscopic “bugging” devices, sign language is bug-proof? (CIA, take notice!)

—gorillas (and chimpanzees, to some extent) have been taught how to communicate in Sign? (Paradoxically, those who support its use by animals may not favor its use by humans!)

*These communities in Martha’s Vineyard had an unusually high incidence of hereditary deafness for many generations. Not only did deaf and hearing residents use Sign with each other, but hearing residents used it among themselves when no deaf people were around. Clerc (1785-1869) was the first Deaf teacher of the deaf in the United States, and co-founder of the American School for the Deaf at Hartford, Connecticut, the first school of its kind here.



How ASL and Deaf Education Began Here (a reasonably brief history)

Deaf people in the American colonies and the early United States, as we’ve already noted, were using sign language long before 1817.

The history of ASL in the classroom begins in Hartford, Connecticut, in the early 19th century. Dr. Mason Fitch Cogswell, alumnus of Yale, a wealthy and respected physician, had a daughter, Alice (born 1805), who had been early deafened by spotted fever (cerebrospinal meningitis). She was his favorite child. In

those days, if you lived in the States and could afford it, you had two options: you sent your child overseas to the famous Braidwood Academy in Edinburgh, Scotland (later London and Manchester, England), or hired a private tutor to teach your child to speak, read, and write. If you were poor, you could keep your child at home or send her/him to an asylum. (No education involved.)

Cogswell could certainly have afforded to send Alice to the Braidwood school, but he undoubtedly recoiled from the idea of shipping her off on the hazardous month-long voyage across the Atlantic Ocean to a foreign country for several years on end. Who could guarantee that he would ever see her again? But he could not find a qualified tutor for her. As for the other alternative—to have her institutionalized (“put away”)—he refused to consider it. Alice was obviously bright, but her intellect was not developing normally. She had no real language. There had to be a better way.

Cogswell equipped himself with whatever books he could find on education of the deaf, including one written by the Abbé Sicard, who headed the French Institution Nationale des Sourds-Muets (National Institution for Deaf-Mutes) in Paris. So he knew something about the possibility of education in Sign.

Providentially, Cogswell’s neighbors were the Gallaudets, a distinguished merchant family. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (b. 1787), also a graduate of Yale and a divinity student, was home recuperating from his chronic ill-health. He happened to notice 9-year-old Alice Cogswell, still languageless, standing apart from the other children, unable to share in their play. For all his fundamentalist fire-and-brimstone tendencies, Gallaudet had a natural affinity for children and an immediate empathy for the languageless deaf girl. His

own sickness had excluded him from the rough-and-tumble play of childhood; he too had been forced to stand apart. He summoned her. That afternoon, he taught her to write the word HAT in the dirt with a stick. Confident that she understood, he discussed her situation with her father. They agreed that Alice could and should be educated. But surely there were others like Alice? Why not start a school?

Most other wealthy parents of deaf children had been content to hire tutors for their own children, period. Dr. Cogswell’s concern went beyond the plight of his daughter; he recognized the need for a school to serve all the deaf children of New England. They had a Constitutional right to an education. He shrewdly enlisted the aid of other wealthy citizens, some of whom also had deaf children. He had a census taken by Congregationalist ministers, which showed that there were 84 deaf persons in Connecticut alone—enough to warrant the establishment of a school. Finally, he called together a meeting of ten “city fathers,” and Gallaudet was chosen to go to Europe and learn whatever he could about educating the deaf. He accepted eagerly. In just one evening, they raised sufficient funds for him to undertake the journey. The goal: to establish a school for the deaf in Hartford.

Gallaudet was not successful in getting assistance from the Braidwood school. As with other oralists of that time, the Braidwood family guarded their “secret” techniques jealously. They enjoyed a profitable monopoly on education of the deaf in the English-speaking world, and had no intention of giving away their methodology for free. Disgusted and disappointed, Gallaudet went to a public demonstration given by the Abbé Sicard in London. Waiting out the political turmoil then raging in France (he was not on good terms with Napo-

leon), the abbé was giving public lectures about the French method of educating the deaf and demonstrations of the intellectual abilities of two of his prize pupils, Jean Massieu and Laurent Clerc. The audience was invited to ask them questions—such as definitions of abstract concepts—which the abbé interpreted to the Deaf men in Sign. Taking turns, they wrote their answers, in French, on a large slateboard. These answers were often witty, sometimes profound. Gallaudet was astounded.

Sicard invited Gallaudet to visit the French National Institute. Finally, in 1816, despairing of accomplishing anything in England, Gallaudet embarked for Paris. He was accorded a warm welcome at the Institute.

Even though he was given free access to all the classes, had private tutoring by Sicard and Massieu, and studied diligently, Gallaudet recognized that there was simply not enough time to master everything he needed to know to teach the deaf. Dwindling funds forced him to book passage home. He boldly proposed to Clerc that he accompany him to the States to help set up the new school. (This was not part of the original plan, of course.) Clerc, who had an adventurous streak, agreed. Although Sicard at first refused, he finally relented, agreeing to loan Clerc for 3 years.

During their 51 days on board the *Mary Augusta*, Clerc taught Gallaudet the fine points of FSL, and Gallaudet taught Clerc English. (Clerc became an excellent writer in this second language.)

When Gallaudet and Clerc arrived in the States, they set about raising funds for the school. Gallaudet was a superb orator—and a persuasive one. Alice Cogswell had been placed in a nearby girls' school for the time being, and was barely literate. On arrival in Hartford, Clerc met Cogswell and Alice. There was great joy at

their first meeting—the urbane, cultured, and brilliant Parisian gentleman and the child for whose sake he had come. Both deaf. Cogswell must have been mightily reassured. Gallaudet's bold gamble was to pay off—quite handsomely.

The American Asylum for the Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons opened in Hartford on April 15, 1817. Alice Cogswell was the first to enroll. Clerc and Gallaudet each taught classes. Sign language was used in class. Clerc used FSL, fingerspelling, and, for a time, the cumbersome “methodical signs” used in the French National Institute classes, but soon found (to his dismay) that his students were “changing” his signs. What they were doing, of course, was adapting them to their preferences. A number of them already had their own way of signing—a background in native Sign, so to speak. Ultimately, Clerc discarded the “methodical signs,” and ASL became more and more a distinct language, used inside and outside the classroom, although it really wasn't thought of as *a language* until William Stokoe subjected it to linguistic analysis 143 years later. It was simply called “sign(s)” or “deaf sign.” ASL was not taught as a subject in the class; it was employed as the medium of communication, along with written English. The school's goals were English literacy, industriousness, and Congregational-style morality.

The curriculum did *not* include speech training. It was considered unprofitable, a waste of time, as the majority of students would not derive enough benefit from it to make it worthwhile. A few “semi-mutes” (students who had lost their hearing after learning how to talk, or those with a moderate hearing loss) were given some articulation training, but aside from these, there was no attempt to teach speech skills. The emphasis was on

education.

Clerc settled down to a busy and productive life in Hartford and largely spent the rest of his life there; he made only three more visits to France. Gallaudet became supervisor of the institution. Underpaid and overworked, he was frequently in conflict with the school board. Both Clerc and Gallaudet married "Hartford" students. In 1818, Clerc married Eliza Crocker Boardman, one of his first pupils. It was the first Deaf marriage in the country. Soon afterwards, Gallaudet married Sophia Fowler, the future "queen of the Deaf community." Both marriages were happy. All the children were hearing, but the eldest and youngest Gallaudet children each continued their father's mission. The younger Thomas Gallaudet established the first Deaf church in the States. Edward Miner Gallaudet was the founder and first president of what is now Gallaudet University. They were native Signers, and most likely learned ASL from their mother.

Two of the first Hartford pupils became teachers of the deaf, initiating an honored American tradition of the best deaf pupils becoming teachers of the deaf themselves. The Hartford Asylum became a model for the establishment of dozens of other schools for the deaf—Fanwood (New York), Pennsylvania, Indiana—all across the country. It also led to the establishment of Gallaudet University—the world's first (and still the only) liberal-arts college for the Deaf.

Within a remarkably short time, ASL-based education led to the formation of a real Deaf community, complete with clubs, churches, organizations, sports, and a flourishing Deaf press, known as the "Little Paper Family." The residential schools created a class of highly-educated, skilled Deaf people who were, in fact, bilingual—fluent in Sign, and articulate in written English. We call

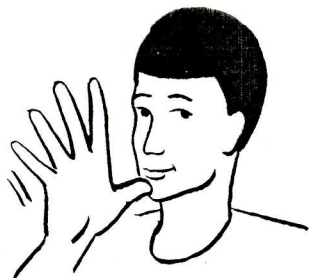
this the "Golden Age of Deaf Culture."

In 1850, Gallaudet and Clerc were honored at a convocation of all living Hartford alumni. (Dr. Cogswell and Alice had both died in 1830.) It was a beautiful sight—the reunion of dozens of educated and skilled Deaf citizens, alumni of Hartford. Gallaudet died the next year. Clerc lived long enough to witness the upsurge of oralism that threatened to undo everything he had labored to achieve.

Key to illustrations on page 28

how?	spring
	who?
nervous	what?
	curious
confident	laughing

"Mother"



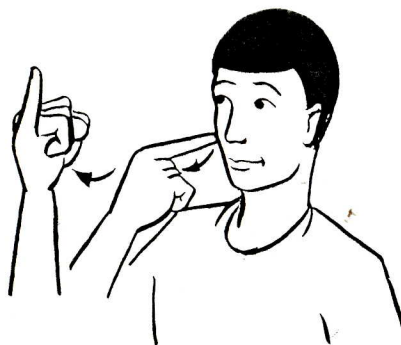
American Sign Language



Australian Sign Language



Spanish Sign Language



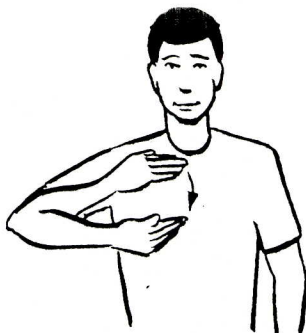
Japanese Sign Language

Gestuno

(International Sign Language)



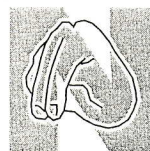
"Man"



"Woman"

Chapter 2

Is there one sign language for all countries?



o more so than there is one spoken language for all countries! But everywhere you find Deaf people, you will find sign language. The impulse to communicate is universal.

For deaf people, the impulse to sign is universal. Deaf children not exposed to any standard sign language will invent their own sign systems ("home sign"). Every national sign language, however, is different. In Europe, even within a single country, there can be tremendous variation from city to city, while American Sign Language, although possessing many regional dialects and "accents," is standardized enough to be easily understood by ASL users (an estimated 500,000) from coast to coast. So a Deaf Californian and a Deaf New Englander will have no difficulty understanding each other. ASL is also used in Canada, which extends its scope considerably.

Deaf people in the States were using sign language long before Laurent Clerc, the first Deaf educator in America, arrived from France, bringing French Sign Language with him. It is thought that the native sign language of Chilmark and Tisbury, the Martha's Vineyard communities with an unusually high incidence of hereditary deafness, evolved from Old Kentish Sign Language, as the earliest deaf settlers came from the Kentish region of England.

Although ASL was subsequently influenced by FSL (and thus has some recognizably French signs), many

such borrowed signs have been modified over time. But while ASL belongs to the same family as FSL and Spanish Sign Language, which all have some signs in common ("baby," "book"), it is quite different from British Sign Language, which remained largely impervious to French influence. Nonetheless, the French National Institute (where Clerc trained and taught) sent its teachers to several countries, including Holland, Denmark, Spain, and Russia, so FSL left its mark on those sign languages too.

Scandinavian sign languages (e.g., Swedish Sign Language) form an important group, rich and vibrant, whose artistic possibilities have begun to be explored. Asian sign languages (e.g., Japanese Sign Language, Taiwanese Sign Language) differ from any European sign language. Each school for the deaf in Japan—and 11 of the 12 are oral—has its own sign-language system, as used by the students. Some African sign languages are influenced by the native sign languages of missionaries. There are undoubtedly several complete and rich sign languages that have never been adequately studied or recognized.

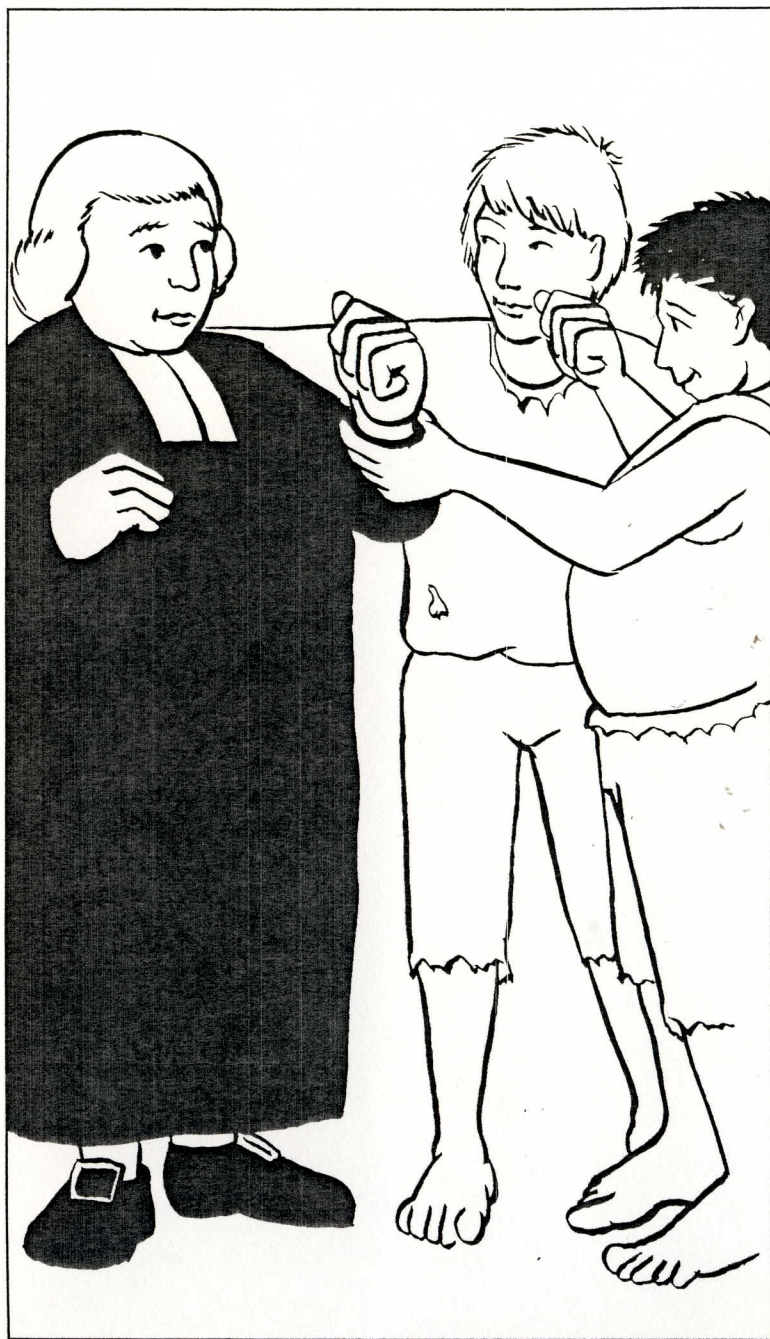
Every different sign language reflects its own history, culture, and social mores. Thus (in most of these different sign languages) you will find completely different signs for universal concepts: "mother," "father," "boy," "girl," "day," "night," "tree," "water," "good," "bad," and so forth.* Each sign language may have a myriad of regional variations. And what is a perfectly acceptable sign in one language may turn out to be an obscenity in another! E.g., the perfectly innocent sign for "brother" in Taiwanese Sign Language bears an uncanny resemblance to the vulgar "up yours" gesture popularized by hearing (and deaf) Americans.

But Signers from one country seem to have less trouble

establishing communication with Signers from another than do their speaking counterparts. Deaf people can be very inventive, even ingenious, in bridging language gaps! They improvise, using gestures, pantomime, expressions—whatever works—until they establish some sort of mutual comprehension, and build on that foundation.

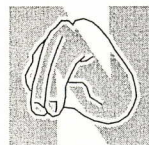
"International sign language" does exist to some extent. An "artificial" international vocabulary, "Gestuno," which functions as a kind of visual Esperanto, was developed in the mid-70s by the Commission on Unification of Signs of the World Federation of the Deaf. Gestuno hasn't really caught on. It is useful for international gatherings of Deaf people (e.g., the Gala Opening Performance at The DEAF WAY Conference and Festival in Washington, D.C., July 1989), where it's impractical to throng the stage with dozens of interpreters in everybody's native sign languages. American Deaf performers were specially drilled in Gestuno, and used it to introduce acts and give simple communications to the audience—"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen;" "No smoking, please;" "No flash photography allowed at performances;" "I hope you enjoy our show." The signs used are as simple, logical, and universally recognizable as possible. Since Gestuno was developed by a committee, it's not a real language. But Gestuno was partly based on ASL, which, as the world's most well-known and popular sign language, is the closest thing we have to a "universally" recognized one.

*In many spoken languages across the world, the word for *mother* begins with or contains the letter "m." For example: *mater* (Latin); *mama* (Italian); *mère* (French); *maman* (French vernacular); *madre* (Spanish); *maht* (Russian); *matka* (Polish); *Mutter* (German); *mor* (Danish, Swedish, Norwegian); *imma* (Hebrew).



Chapter 4

Wasn't French Sign Language invented by the Abbé de l'Épée?



o. French Sign Language was invented by Deaf people. It was the exclusive property of the French deaf community, for there were a fairly large number of deaf people living in Paris in the 18th century. They may have been forced to the outer fringes of society, but they had the rudiments of a recognizable Deaf culture—namely, a language.

The Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée (1712-1789) was a “neighborhood priest” whose involvement with deaf people began in the mid-1700s when he met twin deaf sisters whose mother begged him to teach them. (Another priest, the Abbé Simon Vanin, had been working with them, teaching them moral concepts by means of pictures of the saints, but had died.) Accordingly, l'Épée sought to instruct them. His original purpose was, of course, religious as well as humanitarian. He wanted to save deaf people's souls from damnation. In order to achieve salvation, deaf people had to understand the sacraments. They had to have access to education. But the Abbé had to communicate with the deaf.

He researched what available information there was on deaf education, and adapted the Spanish system of fingerspelling. More important, he was the first hearing person to go to the deaf community, to learn its language, to let deaf people teach *him*. Ultimately, he founded the first successful school for deaf students in Paris, which became the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes. In his classes, he used signs from FSL with an

added set of signs he *had* invented, *les signes méthodiques* ("methodical signs") which represented aspects of French grammar that lacked equivalents in FSL. Erroneously, he assumed that FSL lacked grammatical structure, and wished to remedy this supposed deficiency. The Abbé's "methodical signs" were something of an early "Signed French" system. They were ugly and cumbersome, and his successors modified them—and later dropped them altogether. But the students used "pure" FSL in the dormitories—and so French Deaf culture began in earnest.

Previous educators of the deaf had imposed their sometimes ridiculous ideas, misguided philosophies, and erroneous notions about language onto their pupils and never took into account the fact that deaf people already had a highly-developed *visual* means of communication. All the oralists tried to make their deaf pupils function as hearing persons. They all failed to do so. The Abbé de l'Épée approached deaf people with a more open mind. To paraphrase Harlan Lane's monumental history, **When the Mind Hears**, the Abbé was the first known educator who bothered to learn from the deaf themselves, and that is why, for all his own mistaken notions, he is remembered as a friend of deaf people.*

The Abbé had nothing to do with the invention of sign language. Rather, he *recognized* the importance of sign language as the best way to communicate with and educate deaf people. And he *pioneered* its use in an institutional setting.

L'Épée's successor, the Abbé Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard (1742-1822), wrote a two-volume treatise on deaf education, **Théorie des Signes** (1808). This book found its way into Dr. Mason Cogswell's library; Dr. Cogswell gave it to Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, who had just met

9-year-old Alice Cogswell. Gallaudet studied it and ultimately adapted it for American use. During his sojourn in London, he met Sicard, and went to the National Institute in Paris to learn the method firsthand. The French approach—the use of the native sign language to teach the native written language—was known as the "silent" or "natural" method. In contrast to the oralists of that time, its proponents made no secret of it; they disseminated it, demonstrated it publicly, shared it with whomever wished to learn it, and trained teachers to establish free public schools for the deaf throughout Europe, including Russia. This French model in turn inspired the American model.

Sicard, who directed the Institute during and after the French Revolution, had a remarkable pupil, Jean Massieu, an erstwhile shepherd who became one of the first truly educated Deaf persons. And Massieu's pupil was the legendary Laurent Clerc, the first teacher of the deaf in the United States. Clerc brought FSL to the States, and to this day, American Sign Language shows a distinct "French" influence.

*"Still, it was the abbé de l'Épée, son of the king's architect, who first turned to the poor, despised, illiterate deaf and said, 'Teach me.' And this act of humility gained him everlasting glory. It is his true title to our gratitude, for in becoming the student of his pupils, in seeking to learn their signs, he equipped himself to educate them and to found the education of the deaf. For this reason, the deaf everywhere have always excused him for failing to see that the sign language of the French deaf community was a complete language in its own right, not merely a collection of signs, and did not need to be made to 'conform to clear rules'—French word order and word endings, to be transformed into 'manual French'—in order to serve as the vehicle for instructing the deaf."

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