

The Historical Roots of American Sign Language

Linguistics 149GS

Global Seminar 2022
University of California, San Diego
Monday June 27 to Friday July 29

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday

Lecture and discussion
Time TBA

Thursday

Excursions

Instructor:

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The course explores historical meeting points between cultures that have influenced the growth and evolution of ASL. Language contact and cultural practices of Deaf People of Color have had more impact on ASL than is commonly recognized. Beginning with an examination of historical LSF using documents written by the Abbés de l'Épée and Sicard, Deaf authors Ferdinand Berthier and Pierre Desloges, and the illustrated LSF dictionaries of Lambert, Pelissier, and Brouland, we examine linguistic structures of natural LSF and explore how it was used daily by a thriving community of Deaf people in 18th and 19th century France. As hearing and Deaf French communities interacted, natural LSF was modified by teachers to create "Methodical" sign language, an early pedagogical tool used for educating deaf people in written French and other languages. Sign language was recognized by Condillac, Talleyrand and others who inquired whether it might be the world's most "pure" language, of great cognitive benefit for all people, not just those who are deaf.

Turning our attention to North American Indian Sign Languages, we explore an 1881 Smithsonian Institution catalog by the American ethnologist Garrick Mallery, "Sign Language Among North American Indians Compared With That Among Other Peoples and

Deaf-Mutes," as it outlines commonalities between "indian signs" and the signs of "French deaf-mutes" and "our deaf-mutes," enabling an investigation of how "indian signs" differ from early LSF and ASL. Illustrations by William Tompkins allow us to see how visual-gestural communication served as an effective communication tool for speakers of different languages.

To better understand how the establishment of schools contributes to language change, we explore *lengua de señas mexicana* (LSM), the primary language of 87,000 to 100,000 Deaf people in the urban regions of Mexico, and Hawai'i Sign Language, a distinct sign language first documented in the 1820's and brought to light by a 2013 research study which found 80% of the signs are different from those used in mainland ASL. As in the case of many endangered North American Indian Sign Languages, Hawai'i Sign Language is in need of documentation, preservation and revitalization.

The history of segregation of American Deaf schools played a large part in the growth of a sign language variety documented by Carolyn McCaskill, Joseph Hill and a team of researchers in "The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL." For over 100 years, from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, schools for the Deaf in the southern states and the District of Columbia educated Deaf People of Color in separate campuses or separate buildings (Padden and Humphries). Black Deaf clubs and organizations functioned separately through the end of the 20th century and sometimes longer. The great value of Black ASL as an ASL preservation variety has been increasingly recognized over the past few decades.

Understanding how languages influence each other through the course will be reinforced with practical experience as we observe and interact with Deaf people from Paris and other parts of the world at local and international gatherings. Examining the use of a sign language variety called International Sign that combines signs from several distinct languages, we see how effective intercultural communication is achieved as people from many nations discover commonalities in their cultures and languages.

Key scholars who inform our understanding include the Abbé de l'Épée, the Abbé Sicard, Ferdinand Berthier, Pierre Desloges, Laurent Clerc, Renate Fischer, Sabine Arnaud, Garrick Mallery, Nancy Frishberg, James Woodward, Carol Padden, Tom Humphries, Carolyn McCaskill, Joseph Hill, Ted Supalla, David Quinto-Pozos, Albert Bickford, Melanie McKay-Cody, Sam Supalla and Jeffrey Davis.

Prerequisites: None. This course is intended for students with an interest in sign languages and does not presume or require prior experience with sign language or formal coursework in linguistics. Knowledge of French is also not required.

Weekly responsibilities: The course format is an interactive lecture conducted mostly in English with examples from ASL and other sign languages. Students should come to class having read and viewed the assignments in the weekly modules on Canvas and ready to collaborate in learning through active discussion. Attendance at all scheduled excursions is required and active engagement with people and activities at the Deaf

cultural venues is strongly encouraged. At the beginning of weeks 2, 3 and 4, a student reflection assignment is due. At the beginning of week 5, a mini-presentation is due. Final exams will be conducted on Canvas in class during week 5.

Grading:

- 1) Participation in class activities and discussions (weeks 1-5): 20%
- 2) Reflection #1 (spoken or signed) due Monday July 4 at 10 am on Flipgrid: 10%
- 3) Reflection #2 (typed) due Monday July 11 at 10 am on Canvas: 10%
- 4) Reflection #3 (option: signed/spoken OR typed) due Monday July 18 at 10 am: 10%
- 3) In-class mini-presentation due Monday July 25: 20%
- 4) Final exam (week 5): 30%

Contingency: Our default class meeting location is the CEA building in Paris. Depending on a number of circumstances, it is possible that some class meetings will take place at a different location (including outdoor locations where we may be sitting on grass) or we may meet occasionally on Zoom. Changes to meeting locations announced on Slack will require a reply so we can be sure everyone is aware of the change.

For excursions, in some cases we will leave together from CEA to head to the location, other times we will travel independently and meet at the assigned location. Be sure to stay current with Canvas and Slack announcements.

Summary of Topics in Ling 149

Week 1
6/27-7/1 Sign Language Families and Lexicography of Sign Languages

READ on Canvas:

Carol Padden "Sign Language Geography"
Response by **James Woodward** "Lexicography"

EXCURSION (7/1-3): Festival Clin d'oeil 2022 and city of Reims

Week 2
7/4-8 Historical and Etymological Study of ASL
Archaeology of ASL: origin and evolution of signs
Early sign language dictionaries and Methodical signs

Reflection #1 due on Flipgrid (Monday)

READ on Canvas:

Emily Shaw & Yves Delaporte, "Introduction to The
Historical and Etymological Dictionary of ASL"

Renate Fischer "The Study of Natural Sign Language in
18th Century France"

EXCURSION: St. Jacques school and walking tour of the Jardin
du Luxembourg

Week 3
7/11-15 Documentation of North American Indian Sign Languages
Preservation and Revitalization of Endangered Sign Languages

Reflection #2 due on Canvas (Monday)

READ on Canvas:

Garrick Mallery "Sign Language Among North American Indians
Compared With That Among Other Peoples and Deaf-Mutes"

Samantha Rarrick & Brittany Wilson "Documenting Hawai'i's Sign
Languages"

EXCURSION: TBA

Week 4 The Treasure of Black ASL
7/18-22 History of segregation of American Deaf schools
Andrew Foster and influence of ASL on the sign languages of African nations
A look at lengua de señas mexicana (LSM)

Reflection #3 due on Flipgrid or Canvas (Monday)

READ on Canvas:

Joseph Hill "Sociocultural Context, The Case of Black ASL"

Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture*,
chapter 2 "An Entirely Separate School"

EXCURSION: TBA

Week 5 **Student mini-presentations** due Monday
7/25-29
Final Exam on Canvas during class

Reading and assignment due dates for both Linguistics 9 and Linguistics 149 are in the chart below. Assignment grades will be posted on Canvas.

Attendance and active participation in all class meetings and all scheduled excursions is a key component of both courses (see rubric in Canvas).

All members of the seminar are expected to honor the UC San Diego Policy on Integrity of Scholarship

[https://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu/process/policy.html?
_ga=2.96424028.1594427241.1560881570-842173471.1557185886](https://academicintegrity.ucsd.edu/process/policy.html?_ga=2.96424028.1594427241.1560881570-842173471.1557185886)

and the UC San Diego Principles of Community <https://ucsd.edu/about/principles.html>