

The Historical Roots of American Sign Language

Linguistics 149GS

Global Seminar
University of California, San Diego
Summer Session 1

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday

Lecture and discussion
11 am to 1 pm (subject to change with 24 hour notice)

Thursday

Excursions

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We respectfully acknowledge that we live and work in the unneeded, ancestral, traditional and contemporary lands and territories of the Kumeyaay Peoples/Kumiai nation.

Overview: Linguistics 149GS explores historical meeting points among cultures that have influenced the growth and evolution of ASL. Languages used in Deaf Communities of Color have had a greater 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 Pierre Desloges and Ferdinand Berthier, and the illustrated LSF dictionaries of Pierre Pelissier, Josephine Brouland, and the Abbé Louis-Marie Lambert, we examine linguistic structures of natural LSF and explore how early LSF was signed daily by a thriving community of Deaf people in 18th and 19th century France. As French Deaf and hearing 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 spoken languages. Sign language was recognized by Talleyrand and others, and considered by some to 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 Tomkins provide documentation of how visual-gestural communication served as an effective communication tool for speakers of different languages.

To better understand the role of schools in language change, we explore *lengua de señas mexicana* (LSM), the primary language of over 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 endangered North American Indian Sign Languages, Hawai’i Sign Language is in urgent 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, 2005). 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 during the first two decades of the 21st century.

Observation of how sign languages influence each other is reinforced with practical experience as we 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 with natural gestures understood by all Deaf people, 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’Epée, the Abbé Sicard, Pierre Desloges, Ferdinand Berthier, Laurent Clerc, Garrick Mallery, Nancy Frishberg, James Woodward, Sam Supalla and Jeffrey Davis, Renate Fischer, Carol Padden, Tom Humphries, Carolyn McCaskill, Joseph Hill, Ted Supalla, Albert Bickford, Melanie McKay-Cody, and Sabine Arnaud.

Weekly responsibilities: The course format is an interactive lecture and discussion conducted in English with examples from ASL and other sign languages. Students are expected to come to class having read and viewed the assignments in the weekly modules on Canvas and ready to collaborate in learning through active conversation. 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 the classroom during week 5. Students must have a laptop that is able to access Canvas both during class and to read and submit typed pdf assignments outside class time. Chrome is the recommended browser for all Canvas functions.

Grading:

- 1) Participation in class activities and discussions (weeks 1-5): 20%
- 2) Quit #1: 10%
- 3) Quiz #2: 10%
- 4) Quiz #3: 10%
- 3) Mini-presentation due Monday week 5: 20%

At the beginning of week 5, you will submit a 3 slide presentation uniting one or more of the topics we study in the class with your own area of study, i.e. your major at UC San Diego. You may choose to present and expand on your slides live in class but this is not required.

- 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 Whatsapp 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 Whatsapp announcements.

Prerequisite: 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.

Summary of Topics in Ling 149

Week 1 Sign Language Families and Lexicography of Sign Languages

Nothing to submit during week 1

READ on Canvas:

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

Week 2 Historical and Etymological Study of ASL
Archaeology of ASL: origin and evolution of signs
Early sign language dictionaries and Methodical signs

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"

Ted Supalla "Using Etymology to Link ASL to LSF" (this
Deaf Studies Digital Journal article is provided both in
ASL by the author and in English translation), April 2021

Week 3 Documentation of North American Indian Sign Languages
Preservation and Revitalization of Endangered Sign Languages

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"

Week 4 The Treasure of Black ASL
History of segregation of American Deaf schools
Andrew Foster and establishment of schools in African nations
A look at lengua de señas mexicana (LSM)

READ on Canvas:

Carolyn McCaskill DSDJ 2020 "Black ASL: The Effects of its
Discovery on the Community" - 33 minute video with transcript

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

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

Week 5 **Student mini-presentations** due Monday

Final Exam on Canvas during class

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>