

Signed Languages

American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL),
Langue des Signes Française (LSF)...

not just encodings of the spoken languages of their countries!

for one thing, ASL (American Sign Language) is more similar to LSF (French sign language) than it is to BSL (British Sign Language)...

And there are big grammatical differences between ASL and English. Here's one: English has overt wh-movement:

Who did John see?

Mandarin doesn't:

John kanjianle **shei**? (*Mandarin*)

John saw who

...and in this regard, ASL is like Mandarin, not English...
(video from Carol Neidle's BU website)

(signed languages may be affected by the languages they're in contact with: compare ASL 'I', JSL 'I')

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...on the other hand:

chickadee

Passamaquoddy *kuhkukhahs* ‘owl’

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These are the kinds of signs that sometimes fool people into thinking that ASL is a version of charades...but it isn't! Signs are just as arbitrary in ASL as they are in any spoken language.

There's a fair amount of work on the phonology of signed languages.

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Remember Lardil?

bidngen 'woman' bidngen-**in** 'woman-ACCUSATIVE'

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yak → **yaka** **yak + in** → **yakin**

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Not every compound involves truncating one of the members like this. So a proposal (Brentari): ASL signs have a Minimal Word Requirement, like Lardil. They have to contain at least one move.

'THINK' is the ASL version of Lardil *yak* 'fish': it doesn't have a movement on its own, so you add one if it's by itself.

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Remember Polish obstruents?

wuk 'bow'	wuki 'bows'	wuk <u>k</u>	
wuk 'lye'	wugi 'lyes'	wug <u>g</u>	Final g becomes k
trup 'corpse'	trupi 'corpses'	trup <u>p</u>	
klup 'club'	klubi 'clubs'	klub <u>b</u>	Final b becomes p
kot 'cat'	koti 'cats'	kot <u>t</u>	
trut 'labor'	trudi 'labors'	trud <u>d</u>	Final d becomes t
nos 'nose'	nosi 'noses'	nos <u>s</u>	
grus 'rubble'	gruzi 'rubbles'	gruz <u>z</u>	Final z becomes s

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Polish has voiced obstruents, but they're limited in where they can go; they don't appear at the ends of words.

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similar observation about handshape change:
you can have a sign where the hands just do a short move,
and then change handshape (UNDERSTAND),
or during the movement of a movement sign (OLD)
but, again, no signs where you change shape and then move.

So finger-wiggling and handshape change are sort of like Polish voiced obstruents:

ASL has them, but it has restrictions on where they can be in a word.

(and then we have to figure out why, of course...)

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So it's not that it's physically impossible to violate these generalizations—but the language requires signs to have certain shapes.

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....and in negation.

use of 'loci' to refer:

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(might need some 'name signs'...)

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(and fancier things... "most of my students came to class...")

use of 'loci' to refer:

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and relatedly, 'role shift' (see video)

What have I tried to show you?

- ASL isn't "coded English"
- There's a lot of work on ASL phonology—where by "phonology" we mean the rules for how the articulators work.
- Also a lot of interest in the use of parts of the body other than the hands.

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