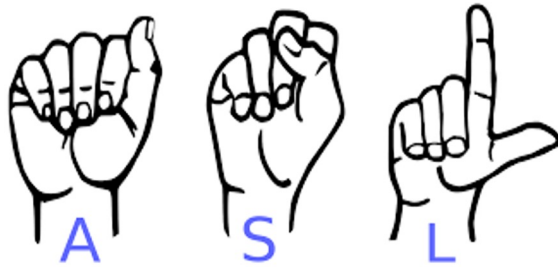
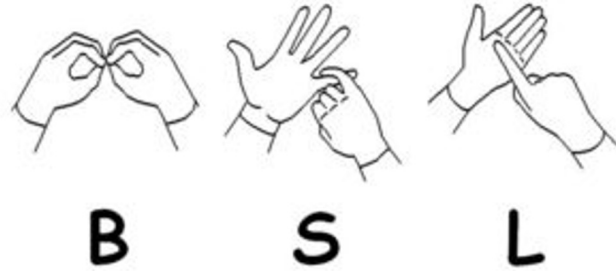


Sign Language and Colonization: Philosophy of Language, Power and The Linguistic Turn



American Sign Language



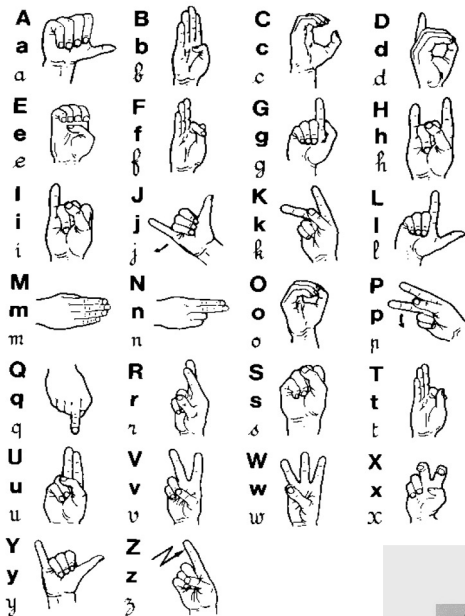
British Sign Language



L S C
"Lengua de Señas
Cubana" or Cuban Sign
Language

By Stella Crouch

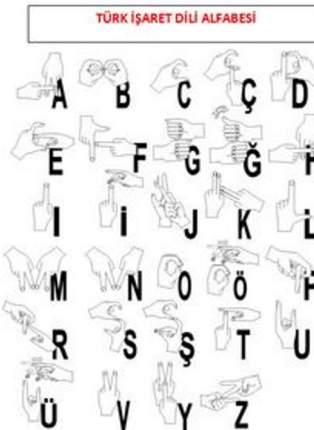
BSL Fingerspelling Alphabet



French Sign Language

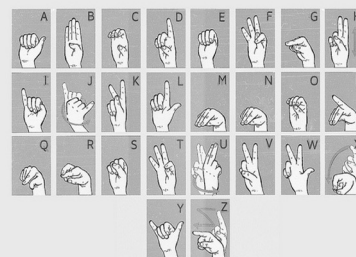


Indo-Pakistani Sign Language



Turkish Sign Language

Het Nederlandse Handalfabet



Swedish Sign Language



Ukrainian Sign Language

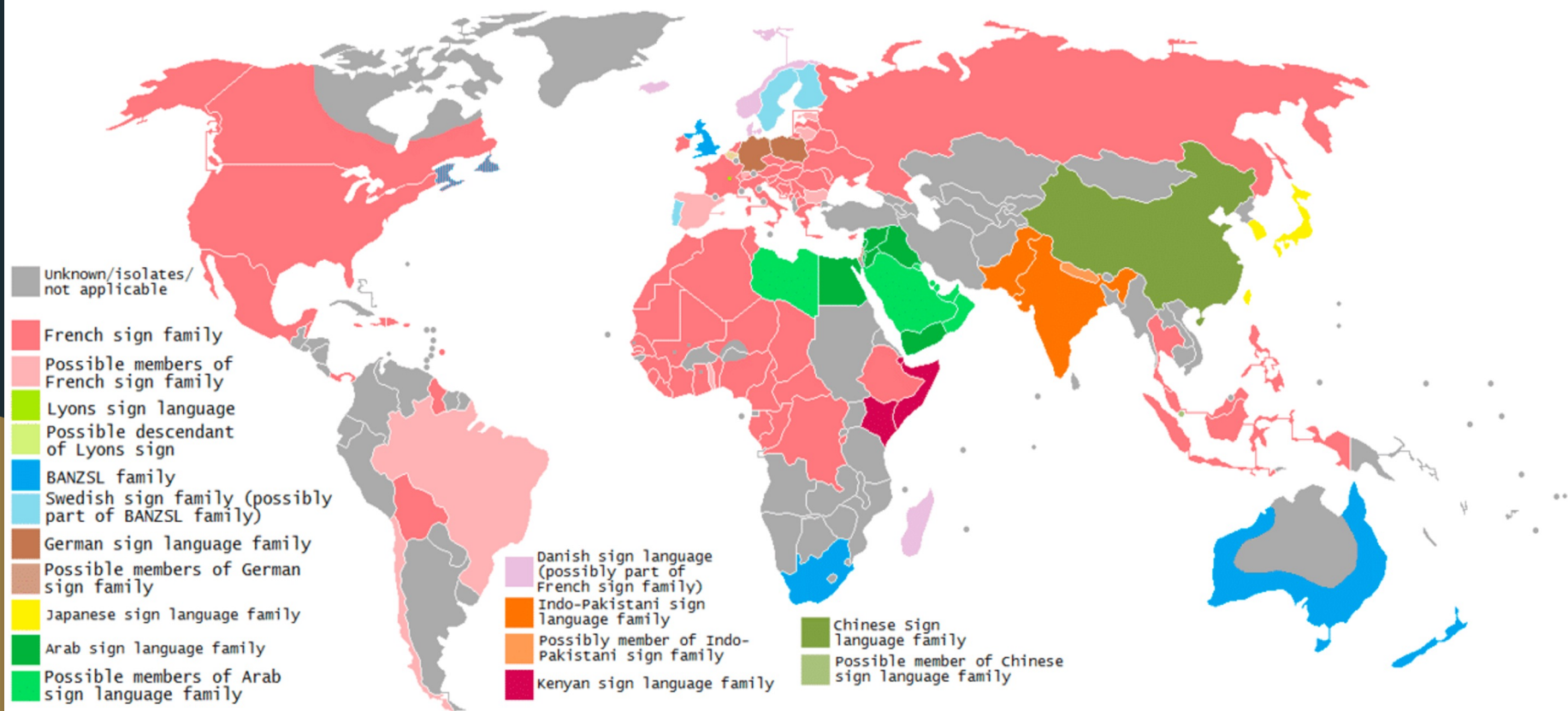


Hungarian Sign Language

Sign Language Families

Sign languages, like spoken languages, have their own unique histories, linguistic patterns and families. For example, New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) and Australian Sign Language (ASL) are almost identical to British Sign Language (BSL). They even share an acronym of BANZSL to encompass all three sign languages and the specific family they belong to. That is not to say that they are all exactly the same. Just as spoken language has regional differences, so do sign languages. Some signs also come from indigenous languages such as Māori in New Zealand and Dhuwal in northern Australia. Colonizers sign languages affecting or even completely changing the indigenous sign language is not an isolated event. Traces of BSL can be found in almost every sign language that originated in a place that was or still is colonized by Great Britain. This forces us to ask questions. How has colonization impacted sign language? How is language and power interconnected? How does the identity of the individual and community using sign language impact their access to rights such as education, healthcare and housing? How have indigenous sign languages, not unlike spoken languages, been stolen by colonization and so called manifest destiny? How have communities resisted having their languages, specifically sign language taken from them? How have deaf enslaved people specifically experienced their languages being threatened?

The map of sign language families is by no means a comprehensive illustration of all of the language families and linguistic connections. The map is of the most common sign languages and exclude all indigenous and lesser known sign languages. Keep this in mind while examining the map and what it represents.



Manually Coded Languages or Constructed Sign Languages vs Deaf Sign Languages

Manually Coded Languages or Constructed Sign Languages are languages that derive from one or sometimes more spoken languages. Deaf Sign Languages are full-fledged natural languages with their own grammar and lexicon. They are not derived or related to any spoken language. Sign languages are different around the world because they developed naturally by deaf communities out of necessity in the same way spoken languages have developed. There is International Sign Language (ISL) however it is not commonly used. Neither are International Auxiliary Languages (IAL) even the most popular international languages such as Esperanto, Ido and Interlingua used much in everyday life. International Sign Language is mainly used in international meetings such as The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and Deaflympic Games.

The Deaflympic Games was founded in 1924 in Paris which continue to be held today. The 1924 Games are considered to be the first games ever for athletes with a disability, preceding the World Wheelchair and Amputee Games in 1948, which would become the Paralympic Games in 1960 but which did not include deaf athletes. These “First Silent Games” as they were called were held just two weeks after the end of the 1924 Summer Olympics, also in Paris. It is salient to mention however that there were 147 male athletes, and only one female athlete: Hendrika Nicoline Van der Heyden, from the Netherlands.

Grammar, slang and prejudice in sign language

Sign languages have evolved like spoken languages throughout time. For instance there used to be no officially recognized signs for LGBTQ+ people and now for pretty much every LGBTQ+ term there is a sign. Sign languages as in spoken languages also have a history of prejudice and stereotyping. For instance the sign for China and Chinese in BSL, and other sign languages, was a slanted eye sign. Also it was not uncommon to sign “yellow skin” for Asian. Many sign languages such as Dutch Sign Language had some version of a hooked nose sign for Jewish and Judaism.

While there is still a fundamental lack of deaf representation especially when examining the intersections such as being deaf and a woman, LGBTQ+, BIPOC or another disability. There has been some progress in recent years particularly with the show “This is Deaf” hosted by Ahmed Mudawi and films such as “The Silent Child” a short film from 2017 and “La Famille Bélier” from 2014 and its remake “CODA” which stands for Child Of Deaf Adult(s) from 2021 which made history as the Best Picture winner of 2022 becoming the first film to center deaf and CODA characters. The film also cast all deaf actors in the roles of the family members except unfortunately not an actual CODA.

This Is Deaf: Black Lives Matter

<https://www.bslzone.co.uk/watch/deaf-blm>

This Is Deaf: LGBTQIA+ Life

<https://www.bslzone.co.uk/watch/deaf-lgbtqia-life>

How long has sign language existed?

One of the earliest written records of a sign language is from the fifth century BC, in Plato's *Cratylus*, where Socrates says: "If we hadn't a voice or a tongue, and wanted to express things to one another, wouldn't we try to make by moving our hands, head, and the rest of our body, just as dumb people do at present?" (Bauman, 2008) Socrates referring to deaf and hard of hearing as dumb is degrading and unforchantly not uncommon then and now. Despite sign languages being just as complex as spoken languages, with their own grammar, regional differences and families they are often not regarded as "real languages".

Just like lesser known spoken languages, lesser known sign languages are increasingly not being taught instead either being taught the most common sign language of those in power or defaulting to the more popular sign language of that area. For example Maritime Sign Language (MSL) is descendant from BSL is being supplanted by American Sign Language (ASL) and now MSL has been largely restricted to older Deaf people in the Maritimes in Canada. There are currently less than one hundred people who sign MSL mostly concentrated in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and a few (actually outside of the Maritimes) in Newfoundland and Labrador. MSL now mainly uses ASL signs and grammar and has changed from its original BanzSL influenced two-handed manual alphabet to the one-handed American manual alphabet, whose fingerspelling has been influencing lexicalisation. (Yoel, 2009) Indigenous Hand Talks have most likely existed for hundreds if not thousands of years.

This is no isolated coincidence. The same can be seen with American Sign Language impacting places the United States has colonized. Spanish and French Sign language have impacted places Spain and France colonized such as Mexico and much of Central and South America. Portuguese Sign Language has also impacted Brazilian Sign Language.

The Linguistic Turn: How Language and Philosophy are Interconnected.

The linguistic turn is often taken to also mean the birth of analytic philosophy. The linguistic turn can be considered a discipline within analytic philosophy. Analytic philosophy emphasises language and the way in which we interpret other people's ideas based on how they are presented to us. It seeks clarity and attempts to make use of formal logic that can be built on previous pillars of knowledge that has already been communicated. Many philosophers involved in the linguistic turn in the first half of the 20th century sought to more greatly understand how people (and in some cases plants and animals as well) communicate on the most subtle or seemingly insignificant of levels to gain insight into how that affects broader situations, fields, philosophies and ultimately our survival. Part of this study of how the languages we use affect the society and philosophies we create has been inquiring and observing the various ways we are able to communicate. We can ask many of the same questions that philosophers particularly those working within the linguistic turn and analytic philosophy have asked through history such as:

- What makes a language unique and how do those differences impact work done in that language?
- Should a language be measured solely off its efficiency to convey ideas and information?
- What are the nuances that are missed when transcribing non written languages?
- Should the language used in the study and preservation of philosophy become more standardized or would that harm the original meaning of the works and the study of philosophy itself?

The Unfounded and Ableist Association with being Deaf or Hard of Hearing and Unintelligent

Geronimo Cardano, a 16th-century Italian mathematician and physician, is now considered the first scholar to affirm that learning did not require hearing. Cardano's son was deaf, and through him, the scholar began to study how his son learned and concluded that deaf people could learn just as well as hearing individuals. This however was not widely believed or studied and Cardano's studies unfortunately weren't very well known.

Thomas Braidwood, a teacher from Edinburgh, founded 'Braidwood's Academy for the Deaf and Dumb' in 1760, which is believed to be the first school for deaf children in Britain. The school primarily taught oral communication methods, as described by Francis Green - whose son attended the Braidwood school in the anonymous treatise *Vox oculis subjecta*. In this account, Green describes how his son Charles would surely develop "a perfect acquaintance with language both oral and written", and how deaf pupils were given "a tolerable general understanding of their own language [English] so as to read, write, and speak it, with ease". Green also describes Braidwood's views of spoken language:

“Mr Braidwood hath frequently intimated to me, as an opinion founded upon his experience in this art, that articulate or spoken language hath so great and essential a tendency to confirm and enlarge ideas, above the power of written language, that it is almost impossible for deaf persons, without the use of speech, to be perfect in their ideas.” (Pyfers, L. 2020)

Indigenous Hand Talk

In North America, Plains Sign Language, First Nation Hand Talk or Plains Indigenous Sign like many indigenous languages has been historically under threat due to the mass murder, relocation and cultural assimilation of indigenous peoples. Though the number of people who can still communicate using an Indigenous Hand Talk throughout the world is difficult to account for. Darin Flynn, professor of linguistics at the University of Calgary, argues that Plains Indian Sign Language (PISL) is still known by a few community members on the Plains, whereas the Plateau language is only partially known by a couple of elders. Inuit sign language fares a little better in terms of population; according to linguistic expert Joke Schuit, the language was known by about 80 Inuit people in 2012. Historically colonizers enforced a ban on sign language for indigenous people. Deaf or hard of hearing indigenous people if taught a sign language at all were taught ASL or “white man sign”.

Australian Indigenous or Aboriginal sign languages are another example of extremely endangered languages. Many Australian indigenous cultures have or traditionally had a manually coded language which was or is signed counterpart of their oral language. Some of these sign languages were used only at particular times, such as during a mourning period or during initiation ceremonies for men, as was also the case with Caucasian Sign Language but not Plains Sign Language, which did not involve from periods of no speaking, or deaf sign languages, which are not encodings of oral language. Plains Sign Language is one of the only known not deaf sign languages that doesn't clearly derive from a spoken language.

Anti-Deafness, Eugenics and Dead Sign Languages

As in other forms of systemic oppression anti-deafness is connected to other oppressions especially for those who have intersecting oppressions. One of the most famous inventors Alexander Graham Bell who invented the modern telephone and hydrofoils was heavily involved in eugenics. He researched the genealogy of deaf families in Martha's Vineyard, which had its own unique sign language in the early 1880s (Engs, 2003). He also began breeding experiments on sheep while living in Nova Scotia in 1889 (Engs, 2003). He joined the American Breeders Association, which was involved in the American eugenics movement, and served on the Committee on Eugenics for the American Breeders Association, and eventually he headed the Committee on Deaf Mutism (Engs, 2003 ; Biographiq, 2008).

He believed that deaf people marrying and having children was not “advisable” despite his own mother being deaf and his wife being deaf since she was five due to contracting scarlet fever. To this day Bell is contested by the deaf community and historians because he did advocate for deaf education however mainly to better “integrate deaf people” into hearing spaces. (Jay, M. 2021)

Why are Indigenous Hand Talks on the verge of disappearing?

Bell was also among many people at the time imploring white deaf people to not use sign language as to not “impersonate” ingenious people. This relationship between hand talk and sign language lead to the stigmas between both to overlap. In many ingenious boarding schools they not only stripped their spoken languages from indigenous children but also their hand talk leaving indigenous deaf children especially vulnerable to both anti hand talk education and anti indigenous education in general.

During the late-1800s, the push to assimilate indigenous people into white America paralleled another movement: the push to assimilate deaf people into "speaking" culture. It was called "oralism." Proponent supporters included Alexander Graham Bell who deemed sign language "uncivilized," and pushed for lip reading and spoken, English education. By 1880 they even passed an international resolution that banned sign language education. Though this resolution ASL would not be recognized as a fully formed and “practical” language for nearly a century. Plains Sign Talk has the most documented historical range of other Indigenous Sign Languages in the United States and Canada. An estimate of 115,000 “sign-talking Indians” were thought to exist in 1885, including many different tribes much as Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Sioux, Kiowa, and Arapaho.

The increase in recent years of hearing people taking an interest in ASL, teaching their children some signs or having books that show signing has not translated over for Plains Indian Sign Language PISL. Indigenous hearing students were forced to speak English in boarding schools, and Indigenous deaf students, in many cases, were forced to replace PISL with ASL. Today, there are just a handful of fluent PISL signers left in the US.

In recent years there have been has been a push to document PISL and teach it to younger generations. In 1930, the U.S. government sponsored a conference on Indigenous Sign Language that resulted in production of a film, "The Indian Sign Language." The film has been a valuable resource for documenting the language.

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