



**ASHA**

American  
Speech-Language-Hearing  
Association

## **Final Report**

# **Ad Hoc Committee to Develop a Position Statement on American Sign Language**

**March 2019**

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## **Position Statement: American Sign Language (ASL)**

Ad Hoc Committee to Establish a Position on American Sign Language (ASL)

**About This Document:** This position statement is an official policy of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). ASHA develops position statements when the Association’s official stance on a topic needs to be clearly established for members and the public. Although ASHA has long recognized that ASL is a language, the request to draft this statement arose from inconsistencies in how federal agencies view ASL as a language distinct from English for the purposes of service provision (see, e.g., National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 2019; National Science Foundation, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This statement formally clarifies and affirms ASHA’s long-held position that ASL is a distinct language.

In August 2018, the ASHA Board of Directors (BOD) approved a resolution to form the Ad Hoc Committee to Establish a Position on ASL (hereafter, “the Committee”). The resolution charged that the Committee consist of six ASHA members with expertise and experience regarding ASL. The Committee included a member who is deaf, an ASL linguist, audiologists, speech-language pathologists, and a teacher of the deaf. The Committee members who developed this position statement were James Mahshie, chair; Katie Brennan; Tina Childress; Cheryl DeConde Johnson; Brenda Seal; and Aaron Shield. Adena Dacy served as ex officio. Marie Ireland, Vice President for Speech-Language Pathology Practice (2018–2020) served as the BOD liaison. The statement was open for peer review by all interested parties prior to final approval by the BOD.

Respondents included audiologists, speech-language pathologists, linguists, teachers of the deaf, ASL teachers, interpreters, researchers, administrators, other related professionals and students, professional associations, individuals who are D/deaf, families, and advocacy groups.

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### **Position Statement: American Sign Language (ASL)**

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) affirms that American Sign Language (ASL) is a language, possessing complex levels of language organization, including phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics. ASL is distinct from other signed languages around the world and from English. Like all languages, ASL evolves over time within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts.

### **Rationale**

#### **Introduction**

ASL is a distinct, rule-governed language that has existed in the United States and parts of Canada for more than 200 years. ASL consists of linguistically specified handshapes, locations, movements, palm orientations, and non-manual markers to convey information (Valli, Lucas, Mulrooney, & Rankin, 2011). As with any language, ASL has social, ethnic, and geographic variations and dialects. ASL linguistics has evolved as a specific research discipline that is the object of systematic study in graduate courses and doctoral programs in universities throughout the United States and Canada.

#### **Historical Background**

ASL emerged in the 19th century at what is now called the American School for the Deaf (ASD), founded in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817 by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc (Lane, Pillard, & French, 2000; Supalla & Clark, 2015). The roots of ASL can be traced to a mixture of Old French Sign Language, which was the language of instruction at ASD, and the signed languages and systems in use in 18th and 19th century New England (e.g., Martha's Vineyard Sign Language; Groce, 1985; Lane & Grosjean, 2010; Lane et al., 2000; Padden, 2010; Supalla & Clark, 2015). Professor William Stokoe of Gallaudet College's Linguistics Research Lab first documented ASL as a language in 1960 (Stokoe, 1960). Stokoe, along with his

colleagues Carl Croneberg and Dorothy Casterline, recognized the linguistic structure of ASL in the book *Dictionary of American Sign Language on Linguistic Principles* (Stokoe, Casterline, & Croneberg, 1965).

### **Equivalence of Signed and Spoken Languages**

Linguistic, developmental, and neurobiological research confirms that there is equivalence between signed and spoken languages (Emmorey et al., 2005; Emmorey & McCullough, 2009; Klima & Bellugi, 1979; Kovelman, Shalinsky, Berens, & Petitto, 2014; Stokoe, 1960; Stokoe, Armstrong, Karchmer, & Van Cleve, 2002). Children who are exposed early to ASL achieve language milestones on the same trajectory as children who acquire spoken languages (Anderson & Reilly, 2002; Emmorey, 2002; Meier & Newport, 1990; Newport & Meier, 1985). Moreover, the “critical period” of language acquisition applies to signed and spoken languages alike, such that the ability to learn a first language decreases with age, and late-exposed learners show age-of-acquisition effects (Mayberry, 1993; Mayberry & Eichen, 1991; Newport, 1990). The left-hemisphere language centers of the brain associated with comprehension and production of spoken languages are also involved in the comprehension and production of ASL and other signed languages (Campbell, MacSweeney, & Waters, 2008; Emmorey et al., 2005; Hickok, Bellugi, & Klima, 1996, 1998; Kovelman et al., 2014; Kassubek, Hickok, & Erhard, 2004; MacSweeney et al., 2002; MacSweeney, Capek, Campbell, & Woll, 2008; Petitto et al., 2000).

### **Autonomy of the Linguistic System**

ASL is an autonomous linguistic system independent from English, from other signed and spoken languages, and from Manually Coded English systems, such as Signing Exact English (Allard & Chen Pichler, 2018; Pftzing, Zawolkow, & Gustason, 1972). Like all languages, ASL possesses its own rules of phonology (Brentari, 1992; Petitto et al., 2016; Sandler, 1989), morphology (Allard & Chen Pichler, 2018; Aronoff, Meir, & Sandler, 2000, 2005; Padden, 1988), and syntax (Allard & Chen Pichler, 2018; Chen Pichler, 2002; Liddell, 1980; Lillo-Martin & Chen Pichler, 2006; Neidle, Kegl, MacLaughlin, Bahan, & Lee, 2000). Like all languages, ASL also has conventions for formal and informal registers as well as rules for turn-taking and for initiating, maintaining, and changing communication topics (Holcomb, 2013; Mindess, 2014; Supalla & Clark, 2015; Wilbur, 2006; Wilbur & Petitto, 1983).

## Conclusion

ASHA's affirmation that ASL is a distinct language is consistent with ASHA's 1982 document titled *Language*, which designates that

- language is a complex and dynamic system of conventional symbols that is used in various modes for thought and communication;
- language evolves within specific historical, social, and cultural contexts;
- language, as rule-governed behavior, is described by at least five parameters—phonologic, morphologic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic;
- language learning and use are determined by the interaction of biological, cognitive, psychosocial, and environmental factors; and
- effective use of language for communication requires a broad understanding of human interaction, including such associated factors as nonverbal cues, motivation, and sociocultural roles.

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