

# What Is Sign Language?

By Christine Wixtrom

That's a good question! There are many types of gestural communication, and sometimes the term "sign language" just doesn't make it clear which form is being discussed. Here are a few brief explanations to help clear up the confusion.

## FINGERSPELLING, OR THE MANUAL ALPHABET

Fingerspelling is a method of representing the letters of the alphabet with the hand. Forming different shapes with your hand, you can spell out words such as: "H-O-W A-R-E Y-O-U?" Manual alphabets are **not** languages; they are visual codes for languages. The one-handed American Manual Alphabet is a code for English. (A two-handed manual alphabet is used in Europe.) There are different manual alphabets used to code different languages.

## AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE, OR AMESLAN, OR ASL

ASL is a visual-gestural **language**. ASL developed in a natural manner, as a means of clear visual communication used among deaf people. ASL was created by deaf people and belongs to their culture, Deaf Culture. Today, ASL is used by approximately one-half million deaf Americans and Canadians of all ages. The units of ASL are composed of specific movements of the hands and arms, eyes, face, head and body posture. These movements, or gestures, represent concepts and serve as the "words" of the language. Precise syntactical rules and grammatical principles dictate proper ASL "word" (sign) order, tense indicators, intonation and other aspects of ASL language use. The grammar of ASL is completely different from (and unrelated to) the grammar of the English language. Linguistic research has shown, however, that ASL is as "rich" and "complete" as any spoken language.

## MANUALLY CODED ENGLISH

There are a number of signing systems that were artificially devised in order to teach English to deaf children. MCE sys-

tems use manual signs to represent English visually. Signs used in these systems may be taken from ASL, but these vocabulary units are used to represent English words (rather than to represent concepts, as they do in ASL). Some new signs are contrived (invented) for English words or word parts in these systems. All signs are used in English grammatical order. Thus, these forms of manual communication are **not languages**—they are **systems**. Using one of these manual systems along with spoken English is a **method** of communication called "simultaneous communication" (or "sim-com"). Some MCE systems: Seeing Essential English (SEE1), Signing Exact English (SEE2), Linguistics of Visual English (LOVE) and Signed English (Bornstein, et al.).

## PIDGIN SIGN ENGLISH (PSE)

When some ASL signs, some newer signs, some contrived signs and fingerspelling are used in flexible grammatical order, this is referred to as Pidgin Sign English. PSE is not a structured system, but a natural mix of two languages, ASL and English. One of the varieties within this category is Conceptually Accurate Signed English (CASE). Users of CASE will choose a sign on the basis of its meaning in ASL, rather than on the basis of its sound or spelling in English. The signs are used in English grammatical order, and may be accompanied by English mouth movements.

## PANTOMIME

Pantomime is **not** "sign language." Pantomime is not a language at all. Pantomime includes motions, gestures and dramatics used to communicate. It is used in theatre, and between people who do not share a common language.

References: 1) *ASL: A Look At Its History, Structure, and Community*, by Charlotte Baker/Carol Padden 2) *Sign Language Interpreting: A Basic Resource Book*, by Sharon N. Solow 3) *ASL: Fact and Fancy*, by Harry Markowicz.

