INTERNATIONAL SIGN:
A PRACTITIONER’S PERSPECTIVE

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“For centuries, scholars from every country
have searched for a universal language and failed.
Well, it exists all around you, and it is Sign Language!”
Ferdinand Berthier, Paris, 1850

INTRODUCTION

International Sign, the international communication used
among deaf people, has been in use for at least the past 150
years. It has gone by various names throughout history: uni-
versal sign language, international gestures, Gestuno, or
International Sign. But what is it, exactly? Today, of course, we
know that each deaf community has its own sign language, and
those languages are more or less mutually incomprehensible
(depending on their historical relations). Then how do we
explain the fact that signers fluent in at least one sign language
can manage to communicate with signers in a completely dif-
ferent and mutually unintelligible sign language? Is
International Sign a language? Is it even international? Where
did it come from? When did it appear? How does it work?

With the rapid increase in the number of international con-
ferences such as the recent Deaf Way II festival and the World
Symposium of Sign Language Interpreters this year in
Washington, and the XIV World Congress of the World
Federation of the Deaf next year in Montreal, interest in
International Sign in the US is growing. Now with over 20 years
of research on international communication among sign lan-
guages, it is time to take another look at what we know about
International Sign: its history, its use, and what we as inter-
preters can learn from it.

I am neither a linguist nor a historian, so this article is basi-
cally a narrative of my personal interest in the history and
practice of International Sign, supplemented by some of the lin-
guistic research of the last 20 years on International Sign.
From 1976-1983, I worked in Paris for the International Visual Theatre (IVT). IVT, the French deaf theater, performed at various theater festivals in Europe and we met deaf actors and deaf people in every country where they performed. I was amazed by the creativity and efficiency of the international gesture system we found ourselves using across Europe (we weren’t sure what to call it at the time – some people called it “Gestuno” and some called it “international gestures”). I started interpreting in this thing we are now calling International Sign in 1977 for World Federation of the Deaf conferences and board meetings. I started writing about it in 1979 while living in France. While interpreting in International Sign is a small part of my current practice as an interpreter, I have been called to interpret into International Sign at least once or twice a year in a total of 16 different countries over the past 25 years.

The Origins of Sign Languages

We do not know when sign languages made their appearance on the human scene, though William Stokoe makes a compelling case for the hypothesis that a gesture language was the prototype for all human language (Armstrong, Stokoe, & Wilcox, 1994). At any rate, in the course of the evolution of language, once spoken languages asserted their dominance, deaf people, living in isolation from other deaf people, had to get by on some kind of pantomimic communication, or “home signs.” But when did pantomime or home signs begin evolving into national sign languages, and when did International Sign first appear? We have very few historical records to help us determine an exact time frame, and the records we do have consist
of the observations of hearing people who were not fluent in signs, who simply observed deaf people and hypothesized about their abilities or their means of communication.

What is certain is that as long as deaf people were isolated, there were no deaf communities to permit the elaboration of a true sign language. Most people throughout history considered deaf people as less intelligent than normally hearing people, and probably as uneducable. Aristotle believed that speech was the basis of the structuring of thought and intelligence and therefore congenitally deaf people were inherently retarded, and gesticulation could be no more than a limited and concrete form of communication (Aristotle, 355 BCE). This prejudice, dating from at least as far back as classical Greece, has persisted for centuries.

When did deaf people start gathering into groups large enough and stable enough to begin evolving language? Before the 18th century, we have to rely on hints from hearing writers who were fairly naive about deafness. Following are a few examples among many. As early as the end of the 4th century CE, St. Augustine wrote of a congenitally deaf family communicating with a sign language and he goes so far as to describe the gestures of their sign system as “linguistic signs” in the same sense that words are linguistic signs in a spoken language (St. Augustine, trans. 1950). We would probably call such a system “home signs” today, but two or more generations of deafness in a large family might constitute a fairly elaborate linguistic system. Was it a language? Did this family live in a community of deaf people who used a sign language as their primary means of communication? We have no way of knowing. At any rate, the vast majority of deaf people until and throughout the middle ages, isolated in their separate villages, were probably considered on a par with the “village idiot.” By the 16th century, Michel de Montaigne, the famous French essayist, wrote that deaf people communicated with great efficiency, and even speculated in the second edition of his Essays, published just after his death, that their communication system included, in addition to a “finger alphabet,” some kind of “gestural grammar” (Montaigne, 1595). In Spain, Juan Fernandez Navarette, “El Mudo,” or The Mute (1526-1579), the king’s painter, was known to have signed fluently and never spoke (Lane, 1984, p. 92). Was El Mudo, in fact, a part of a Spanish deaf community, or just a fluent pantomimic communicator? We simply do not know. We know that Pedro Ponce de Leon (1520-1584) and Juan Pablo
Bonet (1579-1623) tutored deaf children of the Spanish nobility, but there is no evidence of a Spanish deaf community in the 16th and 17th centuries. Incidentally, the hand alphabet that Bonet used to teach speech was borrowed from a franciscan monk, Melchor Yebra (1524-1586), who attributed it to St. Bonaventure, and it is this one-handed fingerspelling that survives in French sign language (LSF), American Sign Language (ASL), and many of the one-handed alphabets used by signers today.

In England in the latter 16th century, there is a record of two deaf friends in Cornwall (Edward Bone and John Kemp), who “communicate[d] in a sign language not readily understood by most hearing people” (Jackson, 2001). Is this evidence of a deaf community? We do not know. Were they part of a deaf community in Cornwall, or did they simply have a personal “home sign” system between them? Again, we do not know. In London, John Bulwer (1637-1657) became interested in gesture and sign language when he adopted a daughter who was probably deaf. In his book Philocophus or The Deafe and Dumbe Man’s Friend, he wrote, “What though you cannot express your mindes in these verball contrivances of man’s invention you want not Speech, who have your whole Body for a Tongue, having a language more naturall and significant which is common to you with us, to wit, gesture, the general and universal language of human nature.” In the book is a lengthy list of deaf people in London: Bulwer might well have been acquainted with at least some of them. This is certainly tantalizing evidence of a 17th century deaf community in England, but we are not certain. Later, near the end of the 17th century, Samuel Pepys mentions in his famous diaries that a British Minister, Sir George Downing from the Kentish Weald, knew enough sign language to communicate with a deaf boy and interpret for him in London. It is plausible that Downing (especially if, say, he had deaf family members) learned some sign language in Kent, from where the Pilgrims left for the New World (some of whom eventually settled in Martha’s Vineyard); if, in fact, the genetic deafness and the sign language of Martha’s Vineyard originated in Kent, then there might have been sufficient numbers of deaf people interacting in the Kentish community to create a fairly elaborate sign language in the 17th century in England³ (Jackson, 2001). But again, we are not absolutely sure.

The first record of a deaf teacher holding classes for deaf
children comes to us from the abbey St. Jean in Amiens, in the north of France (Truffaut, 1993). Etienne de Fay (c.1669-c.1749), deaf from birth, taught a handful of deaf children in the abbey from the 1730s using sign language. “The old Deaf-Mute of Amiens,” besides being able to read and write, was skilled in arithmetic, geometry, mechanics, drawing, history, and architecture, and it was de Fay who drew up the plans and supervised the building when the monks decided to rebuild a part of the abbey in 1706. His classes for the deaf were small, limited to the sons of families who could afford the tuition, and cloistered, and there is no evidence that de Fay’s sign language was practiced in a deaf community outside the abbey. Were there, in fact, instances where deaf people did gather to form communities large enough to develop full sign languages before the 18th century? While the few surviving records of deaf people in Europe are tantalizing (and while we may find records of earlier deaf communities in other parts of the world), we still have no real proof of stable deaf communities until the 18th century in Paris.

The first extant proof of a deaf community large enough to evolve a sign language comes to us in what may be the first book ever published by a deaf man, Pierre Desloges’ Observations of a Deaf-Mute (1779). Finally, a deaf man testifies as to how he learned sign language – the inside story! In his book, published in Paris, we find a record of the development of signing communities in 18th century Europe. Desloges, a glueworker (upholstering and bookbinding), recounts the story of his life. He became deaf at the age of seven and, as his speech deteriorated, he depended on gestures. Before he had met other deaf people, he described his own gestural communication as “disjointed, isolated, and incomplete.” His first exposure to sign language was when he met the deaf servant of an Italian commedia dell’arte actor on tour in Paris. It was from this deaf Italian, who could neither read nor write, that Desloges learned “the art of putting signs together to form distinct images with which one can represent one’s different ideas, transmit them to others of one’s kind, converse with them in a continuous and orderly conversation.” According to Desloges, it is in conversing with his comrades that the deaf person learns “the art of expressing and painting one’s thoughts, even the most abstract, by means of natural signs and with as much order and precision as if he knew all the rules of grammar.” In
an era when peasants begin migrating to the cities to find jobs, Desloges writes of a community of deaf artisans and unskilled laborers assembled in Paris who form a kind of mutual aid society. He writes, “We express ourselves on any subject with as much order, precision, and efficiency as if we possessed the faculty of hearing and speaking.”

From his descriptions, the sign language that Desloges learned from his Italian friend was certainly more than home signs. And this Italian version was similar enough to the sign language used in the 18th century Parisian deaf community for Desloges to consider the Italian and French versions a single sign language. Were the emerging Italian and French sign languages so young, so close to their pantomimic and iconic roots that they were still, in fact, versions of the same language? Or were they different enough to constitute separate languages, and cross-language communication was occurring in an early version of “international sign” without the users of these languages being fully conscious of adaptations they were making to each other? Certainly by the 19th century, only a few decades after Desloges, deaf communities were developing separate national sign languages across Europe, in spite of the fact, as we shall see, that sign language was being touted as the “universal language.”

SIGN LANGUAGE AS THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE

In fact, Pierre Desloges’ little book was written in a time when the sign language of deaf people had become a big issue in France. He wrote his book to defend his language against those hearing educators who rejected sign language as the basis of educating deaf children. Although Desloges was too old to have attended the abbé Charles Michel de l’Épée’s new public school for deaf children in Paris, founded in the 1760s, he was certainly aware of the philosophical debates between Epée and others who had been orally educating deaf children of the wealthy in private tutoring sessions. The centuries-long battle between the oralists and the manualists had begun.

Why was sign language becoming an issue all of a sudden in France? By the 18th century, the famous Enlightenment philosophers, including Diderot, Condillac, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, were speculating about the possibility of a universal language. “Conventional” languages (those based on conven-
tion rather than on nature), they reasoned, distorted reality by representing the real world imperfectly and arbitrarily. The search was on for a universal language: the language of Eden, the pre-Babel language, the universal comprehension of Jesus’ disciples at Pentecost! The perfect candidate for such a language was a gestural language, or, in Condillac’s own term, a “language of action.” Non-verbal communication was in vogue. Theories of the time abounded of the “noble savage” or the “wild child” with a pure natural language unsullied by the trickery or the misrepresentation of reality inherent in spoken languages. Rousseau dreamed of a primordial human language so immediate and true, so concrete, so direct in its representation of reality, so iconic, so mimetic, so transparent, so universal, that it would be accessible to all (Rousseau, 1762).

So when the abbé de l’Epée discovered a community of deaf people using sign language, established his school, and began public demonstrations of his success in educating deaf children with a “language of action,” he became a controversial cultural hero. The sign language discovered by l’Epée was a perfect candidate for the Enlightenment philosophes’ universal language. How much more true to reality can you get than a gesture language? This deaf sign language was not seen as one among many, evolving in distinct deaf communities all over the world. It was “the” long sought-after universal human language! Is it any wonder that the myth of sign language as universal has persisted throughout history? And what a difference from the Aristotelian premise that gesticulation could never be more than a limited and concrete form of communication!

The abbé Charles Michel de l’Epée (1712-1789), by Marie Arbaudie, a deaf porcelain painter
Photo credit: J.-L. Charmet
The portly abbé de l’Epée was a public relations genius. He and his disciples, with their pupils, staged public demonstrations for the wealthy and powerful, and by the mid 19th century, schools for the deaf were established by his disciples all over continental Europe and the United States. French sign language, la langue des signes française (LSF) was exported to newly-created deaf schools in Europe and elsewhere. Thus, the influence of LSF was felt throughout the Western world. As an example, LSF was exported to Vienna, from where the Austrian version was in turn exported to Russia, and at each step along the way, signs evolved differently depending on the life and experiences of the deaf community in each country. Eventually, some version of LSF was exported to Brazil and Mexico by a classmate of Clerc’s, and to Quebec by a teacher trained by Clerc in Hartford (Lane, 1984, p. 155).

While Epée was establishing his school in Paris, Thomas Braidwood was establishing deaf schools in Edinburgh and London. The British Sign Language, BSL, as old as LSF, would also be a formidable influence throughout the world, as it eventually would be exported throughout the British Empire.

The gathering together of deaf children in schools where the language of instruction was sign language, and the communities of deaf adults that gravitated in and around the schools, favored the development of sign languages. But while national sign languages were quietly developing all over the world, “the” sign language was still viewed as a natural universal language by both hearing and deaf people, who frequently wrote about the sign language as if it were one universal language.

A COMMON STRUGGLE, A COMMON LANGUAGE

As deaf people began migrating to the cities, finding each other, and establishing communities, and as schools for deaf
children were established and became rallying points for deaf communities in numerous countries, the sign languages in Europe and elsewhere began evolving and establishing themselves. But these deaf communities were facing serious challenges. As the number of deaf students in the new schools grew (and as governments began taking responsibility for free public education), the need for teachers outstripped the supply of educators who were fluent in sign language. Because most of the hearing teachers recruited for the schools all over Europe and America had not learned sign language, many of them began to extol the virtues of an oral education (eventually, in the United States, the oralist movement was funded and supported by Alexander Graham Bell with the profits realized from his invention of the telephone), and deaf communities realized that they would have to fight for the right to use their language. Their common struggle, all over the globe, was the right to their language. That struggle was born from common experiences that bound them together: usually growing up in hearing families who were not fluent in sign language; going to schools controlled by hearing people; finding husbands and wives and friends with whom they could communicate freely and easily; in short, making their way in a society dominated by hearing people.

This common struggle had to be translated into political action. Ferdinand Berthier, one of the great leaders of the
French deaf community in the 19th century, instituted the tradition of celebrating the birth of the abbé de l'Epée in 1834 by a series of annual banquets (Mottez, 1989). These banquets, held from 1834 to the end of the century, were much more than a mere celebration of Epée. They became the political forums for the deaf community in France to influence the course of deaf education. The goal: reverse the current of oralism which was sweeping the Continent and which would eventually culminate in the infamous Congress of Milan in 1880 and the complete banishment of sign language in schools for the deaf. In his book, *Les Banquets des Sourds-Muets* (1850), Berthier described the famous Parisian banquets, attended not only by French deaf people, but by deaf people from many different countries passing through Paris, and boasted:

“...there [at the banquets], an absolute equality reigns; there, Sign is the only language permitted. Reports, minutes, correspondence, memoranda, everything is read in this language which deaf people from all parts of the world understand wonderfully well” (Ferdinand Berthier, 1850, trans. Moody, 1987).

The annual banquets were held from 1834 to 1900. The struggle to insure the recognition of sign language was continued into the early 20th century by deaf teachers in the schools in France, the US, England, and the Nordic countries,
among others. They gathered during a series of conferences on deaf education starting in 1878, including the infamous Congress of Milan in 1880, and continuing into the 20th century. In the early years of the education congresses, before deaf teachers had been effectively banished from deaf education, the deaf delegates tried their best, through interpreters, to make the case for sign language as the language of instruction in bilingual programs. At the deaf international congresses on education held in 1889 (Paris), 1893 (Chicago, in conjunction with the American NAD conference), and 1896 (Geneva), the deaf teachers and their hearing-signing colleagues tried to stem the tide of oralism (Lane, 1984, pp. 404-14). At the 1900 congress in Paris, the deaf group was forced to meet in separate sessions, ostensibly because the official language was French and not sign language (although Edward Miner Gallaudet could have served as interpreter for the hearing teachers, as he had done in other congresses). The segregated deaf sessions, of course, were conducted in “sign language.” Was this the turn-of-the-century version of “International Sign” (over a hundred years later than Desloges’ friendship with the Italian valet) or simply each participant’s “foreigner talk” version of his own French, American, British, Swedish, or Italian sign language? I would hypothesize that it was International Sign. At least by 1850 (over 15 years after the inauguration of the annual Parisian banquets attended by deaf people from many different countries and 35 years after Clerc’s visit to the London school with Sicard, see footnote 7), some kind of International Sign had already been evolving. Certainly by the international congresses of the deaf starting in 1878, International Sign was regularly used in these international forums.

In fact, at the 1900 congress deaf section, one of the Finnish delegates, Julius Hirn, proposed that every deaf association represented form a committee to collect the signs used by each

The 1898 Deaf Congress in Paris.
Credit: Foyer du Sourd Champenois
deaf community in order to establish an international committee to standardize an international sign language. A handbook of international signs and an international "hand alphabet" would then be created. Hirn's proposal was accepted without discussion. Though there was some follow-up in the Nordic countries, Hirn died in 1910 and we have no records of the handbook ever being published (Wallvik, 2001).

Certainly by 1850, half a century after LSF had been exported around the world, the sign languages in countries where Epée's disciples established deaf schools must have started differentiating into distinct sign languages in each country. In the United States, Laurent Clerc even complained that indigenous American signs (including, probably, the BSL-derived signs from Martha's Vineyard) were spoiling the purity of his American adaptation of French signs (Woodward & Markowicz 1978). It is known that Alice Cogswell, one of the first American deaf students at Clerc's school used a two-handed alphabet, probably the British fingerspelling, before Clerc's arrival (Lane, 1984, p. 179). Additional evidence of the use of BSL signs in the U.S. comes from Behan and Poole-Nash (1995), who found that "when Martha's Vineyard signs elicited from elderly hearing residents [of Martha's Vineyard] in 1977 were presented to a British Deaf signer, he identified 40% of the signs as British Sign Language cognates." And, as we have seen, BSL was also being exported throughout the British Empire, so versions of BSL must have taken root in various countries controlled by the British. British explorer Thomas Skinner reported seeing sign language in the Himalayas in 1830, and also reported that sign language was the "main teaching & social medium" in a Miss Swainson's school for the deaf in Palamcottah, India - these sign languages might well have been derived from BSL. However, deaf people throughout the 19th century and even into the 20th still considered their sign languages to be forms of a single sign language used by deaf people all over the world: the belief in their common struggle, a universal sign language, and an international deaf culture was too strong to be uprooted.

Given that deaf people from all over Europe and the U.S. had a common agenda, it is natural that the signs intimately connected to the deaf experience became established as "international": signs for "school," "deaf," "hearing," "teaching," "signing," "oralism," "work," etc. These signs, in many cases, I think,
borrowed from old LSF, became established as international. What is important is that deaf people had a need to communicate in a common cause. The international signs developed naturally from that need, and provided evidence that sign language was “universal.” This emerging international vocabulary was surely strongly influenced by the French and American deaf delegates, the strongest proponents of sign language, then called the “French method” (as opposed to oralism, or the “German method”). LSF, which had a strong influence in Europe and the Americas (France, Sweden, Austria, Russia, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Belgium, the U.S., Mexico, and Brazil [Lane 1984]), was certainly the sign language with the most influence in the world. As we now know, Berthier’s and Clerc’s precious French sign language, LSF, was not destined to become the international sign language, let alone the universal language of all peoples, but the international signs used among deaf people in the European deaf banquets and congresses from the 1830s and into the 20th century were probably dominated by LSF.9

Among hearing philosophers and thinkers, by the end of the 19th century, the excitement of the Enlightenment’s hope for sign language as the universal language had all but disappeared. Certain anthropologists, however, wrote about the sign languages of deaf people or of “primitive” native peoples, believing that a universal pantomimic language, as faithful as it might be to reality, would also perforce be limited to the concrete and the iconic. These were of course hearing people who were not fluent in a sign language. Colonel Garrick Mallery (1881), who studied native American Indian sign language, wrote that the sign language of Indians and the sign language of deaf people, “constitute one language – the gesture speech of mankind, of which each system is a dialect.” This statement, however, clearly contradicts his admission a few pages later that not all the Indian tribes understood each other’s signs! Interestingly, in 1880 he brought a group of Ute Indians to Gallaudet and discovered that though they could communicate in mime with Gallaudet students, there were some clear examples of miscomprehension (Battison & Jordan, 1980). Tylor (1895), an English anthropologist, writes of the exotic primitive peoples being brought to London on exhibit being “comforted in their loneliness by meeting with deaf-and-dumb children, with whom they at once fall in conversing with delight in this
universal language of signs. This ‘gesture-language’ is universal not only because signs are ‘self-expressive’ (their meaning is self-evident) but because the grammar is international” (cited in Woll, 1990).

During most of the 20th century, in spite (or perhaps because) of the almost universal suppression of sign languages, deaf people held on to this belief in an international solidarity, an international deaf culture, whether it be individual deaf people informally traveling around the globe as tourists or deaf groups going to formal international conferences. The Comité International des Sports des Sourds (CISS) was established in France in 1924, and the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) was established in Rome in 1951. These two major international organizations of deaf people have continued the tradition of sponsoring regular international deaf events through the CISS World Games of the Deaf and the WFD World Deaf Congresses. A third international organization of deaf people, the International Workshop of Deaf Researchers, was established in 1985 to assemble deaf sign language researchers on a regular basis, and all three of these international deaf organizations conduct their business meetings in International Sign.

**LINGUISTIC STUDY OF SIGN LANGUAGES**

In the 1960s, almost 200 years after the abbé de l’Epée, linguists began “re-discovering” sign languages, thanks in no small measure to the pioneering work in the United States of William Stokoe on the east coast and Ursula Bellugi and her husband Edward Klima on the west coast. The rediscovery of sign language as a language in its own right was a veritable revolution. Sign languages were to be once again validated by the linguistic and philosophical establishment.

The linguistic focus of this revolution in the deaf world had a profound effect on attitudes towards the informal “international sign” deaf people had been using for more than a century. In order to combat the myth that sign languages were rudimentary, pictorial and universal, emphasis was placed on the culture-bound, rule-governed grammars of individual sign languages. From the 1950s, linguists had accepted the principle propounded by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure that languages were inherently arbitrary: meaning was to be found in convention, not in the form of words themselves (he was
writing about spoken languages – at the time linguists had precious little interest in signed languages). After all, the concept of a “door” is represented by door in English and la porte in French (the distinction is purely an arbitrary stringing together of phonemes). This, of course, is diametrically opposed to the 19th century’s “language of action,” in which a “door” should look like a door. Modern linguists took great pains to prove that sign languages were not purely iconic and concrete: they are languages, and, as such, as “doubly articulated” and as “arbitrary” as spoken languages, and fully capable of expressing abstract thought. Sign language research in the 1960s and 1970s stressed the similarity of signed and spoken languages, not only in linguistic patterns but in right and left hemisphere brain processing and in language acquisition as well.

As opposed to a Rousseauist “language of action” modeled on nature itself, in which the meaning is in the form, linguists insisted on the Saussurian principle of a purely arbitrary relationship between form and meaning. In the race to prove that sign languages were “like” or “equal to” spoken languages, that sign languages were not just iconic and mimetic, the study of the phenomenon of international sign was given a low priority indeed.

**GESTUNO**

The publication, in 1975, of Gestuno: The International Sign Language of the Deaf, by the British Deaf Association in cooperation with the World Federation of the Deaf, was somewhat controversial.

Meetings of the WFD and CISS had always used some sort of “international sign,” but in the late 1950s, the WFD felt that some standardization of this international communication was desirable. The WFD ad hoc Commission on Unification of Signs,
whose members were Italian, British, Russian, American, and Danish, set themselves the task of selecting the most “naturally spontaneous and easy signs in common use by deaf people of different countries.” The task was enormous, given the highly flexible and uncoded nature of International Sign, the uncontrolled natural evolution it had followed since the beginning of the 19th century, and the logistical problems involved in calling meetings of the commission (in spite of the fact that the members were all European and American). After more than 15 years of committee work, “Gestuno” was finally published in 1975. Deaf people soon began complaining that the signs in the Gestuno lexicon were not iconic enough to be readily understood. In fact, the geo-political considerations of the commission (e.g., arbitrary compromises between using as many signs from the Eastern bloc as from the West) may have been a significant contributing factor to the eventual failure of the Gestuno project. The whole Gestuno effort is a lesson in how language should be allowed to evolve naturally, rather than by committee (cf., Esperanto).

In 1977 for the WFD “Conference on the Family” in Copenhagen, Robert and Betty Ingram, American interpreters then working in Denmark, decided to provide “Gestuno” interpreting services for the conference, and I decided I had to join in the experiment. Forming an “Gestuno” team, we did try to use some of the Gestuno lexicon, though we realized from the beginning that we would have to be much more flexible and try to “act out” the speeches with the informal “international gestures” we had learned from personal experience, rather than limit ourselves to the vocabulary published in the Gestuno book. We felt that our experiences in Europe had given us a basic lexicon of some 500 signs considered “international,” and that we would be able to string them together using space, directional verbs, classifiers, and sentence types in the same way that American, Danish, and French sign languages did. It was clear to us that we could not interpret everything that was said. Acting out, or miming, was going to take longer than simply interpreting into a national sign language, and the vocabulary with which we were working was severely limited. Our goal was to reduce the concepts presented to the main points, get to the kernel of the message in the hope that the participants would be able to intuit the full message based on their knowledge of the subject matter and their cloze skills from experi-
ence in conference-going and presenter behaviors. The experiment was a qualified success. Deaf participants from Germany and South America, without their own interpreters, were able to follow the presenters and participate, but it was obvious that the ability to build up the message into a fairly full equivalent of the presenter’s propos was in large measure dependent upon the participants’ education and experience.

In Copenhagen, the protocol of having national sign language interpreters working on the floor of the hall with delegates from their countries and placing the host country’s sign language on one side of the platform and the International Sign team on the other side of the platform was established. In general, the protocol continues to this day: the International Sign team (usually on the speaker’s right), and the host country sign language (usually on the speaker’s left). The International Sign team was, from then on, visible to all.

For the VIII World Congress of the WFD in 1979 in Bulgaria, a team of Bulgarian “interpreters” (mostly teachers of the deaf) was trained exclusively in the Gestuno vocabulary to interpret the Congress. This Gestuno experiment was a catastrophe, simply because the Gestuno vocabulary was being plugged into the word order of the Bulgarian language without any of the requisite use of space and sign language structures, and with hardly any facial expression. Some participants complained that the interpreters signed like robots. As a result, the VIII Congress became a symbol for those opposed to Gestuno, and, by extension, to any version of International Sign.

In 1981, the WFD Commission on Communication, meeting in Rome, discussed issues related to the increased visibility of Gestuno: given the fact that “international gestures” did not, in fact, constitute a language, should resources be diverted from the development and recognition of national sign languages to support an international gesture system? Would national governments and national deaf associations understand that their first priority should be the development of their own sign languages even though the WFD would provide international interpreting for those who did not yet have professional interpreters? As international gesture interpreting became more high profile, would its prestige overpower national sign languages, which, after all, are true languages and more dependable for transmitting full information? Would the general public be once again lulled into the belief that sign language is uni-
versal, and therefore limited to the concrete and the iconic? The commission wanted to go on record as giving priority to national sign languages.

It was clear to the commission, however, that deaf participants who had no interpretation into their own sign languages would be coming to WFD events, and so international interpreting would have to be provided. A resolution mandating “a pool of hearing and deaf interpreters be established to serve as international interpreters at all international congresses and conferences” was therefore passed by the commission in 1981.

At the X World Congress in Finland in 1987, the WFD started regularly mandating that a team of professional interpreters skilled in International Sign be hired for Congresses and WFD Board meetings. For the Board meetings, the interpreters would voice for secretaries taking minutes (until interpreter and CODA Railli Ojala-Signell, fluent in International Sign, started taking minutes in 1995) and interpret for the occasional visiting hearing dignitary. Host countries of the quadrennial Congresses are still required to provide for professional International Sign interpreter teams. The Finnish organizers of the XI World Congress were very serious about providing quality International Sign interpreting. For the first time, a team of professional interpreters was hired and given a training period for two days before the Congress. Deaf interpreters were inte-
grated into the team of International Sign interpreters. The training period for International Sign interpreters was continued for the Deaf Way festival at Gallaudet (1989) and for the XI Congress in Tokyo (1991). Little by little, the term Gestuno was dropped and the term International Sign was used. “Gestuno” is a catchy and clever term, but in the final analysis, it may be a bit too “hearing” (not to mention a bit too Latinate) to be the name of this phenomenon, which is so deaf. The confusion over terminology persists, however, and some people still use the old term Gestuno, though the Gestuno book is no longer in print, and the WFD no longer endorses the term.

Some deaf people have viewed formal interpreting into International Sign as a kind of oddity: interesting, but not a priority. For those in developing countries who are still deeply involved in the struggle to establish their national sign languages as the primary language of their deaf people and in the effort to train a corps of professional sign language interpreters in their own countries, the focus on International Sign could be seen as an inefficient use of resources. On the other hand, for those in many developed countries who are used to professional sign language interpreters who transmit information to them as efficiently as only a true language can, International Sign has sometimes been viewed as useless. After all, deaf people who were becoming used to full access to communication in their own countries were loath to accept this charade kind of “acting-out-and-guessing” gesturing as a substitute for real language. Those who claimed, and still claim, the right to the use of their own sign language, of course, are perfectly right. There are times, however, when International Sign may be the most reasonable alternative: when deaf people in international conferences do not have interpreters from their own country (e.g., the WFD Congress in Finland in 1987 where 25 of the 51 countries represented sent no interpreters); when an all-deaf international group finds they do not need to incur the expense of hiring teams of interpreters to conduct business (WFD Board meetings, CISS meetings, or the International Workshop for Deaf Researchers); when deaf athletes from around the world gather for the World Games of the Deaf; or for the everyday casual exchanges that occur when deaf tourists travel the world over, finding local deaf people and exploring the local culture firsthand. At such times, International Sign remains a useful tool.
We must, however, be sensitive to the priority given national sign languages by the WFD. The fact that an international meeting proudly announced the provision of “International Sign Language” interpreters in its advance materials has caused problems for some countries. At least one government, for example, refused to pay their country’s interpreters’ expenses to the meeting when they noticed that interpretation into “International Sign Language” was already being provided. Arguments about the reduced information transmitted through International Sign are easily lost on governments looking to cut budgets!

**Modern Literature on International Sign**

In 1975 in Washington, DC during the VII World Congress of the WFD, Robbin Battison and I. King Jordan videotaped interviews and collected information on interactions between signers from different countries. In general, they found that American signers, “linguistically isolated from the rest of the world,” were far less skilled at adapting to the system of “mime and gesture ... augmented by ... agreed upon international signs” than European signers, who had traditionally interacted extensively through travel and emigration. The authors conclude that sign languages are mutually unintelligible, but the signers interviewed in the study indicate that they “stop using their own sign language and start using mime and gesture” when communicating with a signer from a different country. They describe it as “slower than signing, very repetitious, [with] a lot of back-and-forth bargaining and checking about the meanings of various gestures.” While the authors conclude that “deaf signers can and do communicate despite not sharing the same sign language,” they remained skeptical about the claim “that signers everywhere have little or no trouble understanding each other.”

In 1979, I began writing about “international gestures,” starting with an article for the French journal, Rééducation Orthophonique, the journal of speech therapists. The article was the first to describe a “syntax” of International Sign which made use of loci in space, directionality, inflections for aspect, body shifts and eye gaze, facial expressions, etc. These syntactic structures seemed to be, if not standard across all sign languages, at least comprehensible across sign languages. It was
already clear that the Gestuno lexicon would only be of limited use. The main problem, then, in “international gestures” was the problem of lexicon building: aside from a limited lexicon of signs fairly readily acknowledged to be “international,” additional signs could be either borrowed from national sign languages and understood in the context, or “acted out” pantomimically or with classifiers as needed. It was clear to me that the system (not a language, maybe not even a system, but we didn’t know what to call it at the time) worked because of what our deaf actors in Paris were insisting was an “international deaf culture,” a world view based on what is visual. There are many ways to define a culture, but it is the consciousness, the awareness, of having one that makes it exist. And deaf people insist that there is an international deaf culture. While they do not share the same language, they share many of the same experiences, and this commonality has been enough to enable them to find ways to communicate in a way that seems to provide evidence of an amalgam of experiences which points to an international deaf culture.

The 1987 Gallaudet Encyclopedia on Deaf People and Deafness included an article called “International Gestures” in the section on sign languages. We were still struggling at the time with what to call this thing, if we weren’t going to use the term Gestuno. “International gestures” seemed to avoid the problem in calling it “International Sign”: the fear was that people would hear or see “international sign” and immediately think “International Sign Language.” “Gestures,” in other words, seemed a safer term than “sign” since no one was ready to call this phenomenon a language.

British linguist Bencie Woll’s study of International Sign appeared in the 1990 International Journal of Sign Linguistics. For the study, International Perspectives on Sign Language Communication, Woll collected data from five deaf speakers at the first International Workshop for Deaf Researchers in Bristol (1985). The series of International Workshops for Deaf Researchers, instituted in 1985, has been conducted solely in International Sign. The five presenters she included in her data were from Britain, Sweden, Israel, Denmark, and the United States. In a preliminary study on the lexicons of these five sign languages, she concluded that 40-75% (mean 55%) of the signs from a set vocabulary list of 200 words “resembled” each other in 2 of the 3 parameters of handshape, movement, and location.
(While the similarities of a given list of vocabulary across these five sign languages were striking, the 55% figure of similarities in the lexicons of these sign languages cannot be generalized to all sign languages.) In the data collection of the international communication of these five signers, Woll notes that in addition to signs borrowed directly from their own languages, signs deemed “international” or mime were also necessary for successful communication in International Sign. She then analyzed the presentations of the four BSL signers at the workshop (for which she was confident she could distinguish between BSLborrowings, “international” signs, and “mime”): she noted that 69-80% of the signs used in the presentations were borrowings from BSL, 13-21% were either “international” signs or nonce signs (signs invented for and understood only in a particular communication act), and only 6-11% were mimed actions. A high percentage of the signs used by the BSL signers were BSL borrowings (69-80%), but it should also be noted that the workshop was held in England, and deaf people in an international meeting tend to adopt as many of the “host” country signs as they know (there usually are more deaf people from the host country in attendance than from any other country, and attendees from other countries are usually interested in learning as many of the local signs as possible). However, Woll’s findings are interesting in that they were the first attempt to quantify the mix of sources found in the lexicon of International Sign.

From the grammatical point of view, Woll found that the International Sign utterances were quite complex, “drawing on the same sorts of structures found in the individual sign languages”: using localization, verb directionality, inflection for aspect, plurals by reduplication, classifiers, negative incorporation, and rhetorical questions as a discourse device. She hypothesized that the similarities in grammatical structures may be the result of: historical relationships between the languages (it is well known that French sign language had a strong influence on many sign languages, but “families” of sign languages have not been extensively studied); the frequency of historical contact between the languages (non-Europeans had more problems using International Sign than Europeans in the meeting she was studying); the possibilities and constraints afforded by the visual/gestural modality itself; and the fact that sign languages are relatively young languages and may therefore be very close to their iconic and mimetic roots. In addi-
tion, she noted that sign languages are regularly re-creolized, and the supposed closeness of creoles to universal grammar may reflect [the] non-arbitrariness of the visual/gestural medium.

At the 1991 World Congress in Tokyo, presentations by Susan Fischer and Ted Supalla both touched on issues related to International Sign. Fischer’s presentation, Similarities and Differences Among Sign Languages, noted the universality in sign languages of the use of localization, verb agreement using the loci established in space, and classifiers; she stressed the possibilities of the visual/gestural modality of “conventionally incorporating mime into the language,” exploiting the possibilities of a visual system by developing the kind of grammatical mechanisms, like localization, classifiers, and verb agreement that systematize, or grammaticize the elements of mime in all sign languages studied to date. Fischer also cites the re-creolization of sign language of children who learn language without native adult models. At the same Congress, Ted Supalla’s presentation Grammatical Structure of International Signs included numerous examples of the complexity of the syntax of International Sign, unlike the grammatical reduction typically found in spoken language pidgins. He did not go so far as to say International Sign was a language, but he indicated that it sure acted like one! His analysis of the “grammar” of International Sign stirred some controversy among deaf people and interpreters who were concerned that International Sign might be seen as a language and might take priority over national sign languages.

If International Sign is not a language, then what is it? Supalla, among others, was clearly calling International Sign a pidgin, but concluding that its structure was more complex than that of spoken language pidgins. A pidgin is the contact language that results from the mixing of two or more languages in contact for a particular purpose in specific situations. In the field of deafness, the term pidgin has often been used to describe signed English (which has even been called Pidgin Signed English, or PSE) as a mixing of ASL and English, but it is highly debatable whether signed English is a pidgin at all (Lucas & Valli, 1990). International Sign, clearly a pidgin, is a contact language that has evolved entirely between signed languages.

Supalla’s work in International Sign was further elaborated
with the publication of The Grammar of International Sign: A New Look at Pidgin Languages, written with Rebecca Webb and included in the fascinating book, Language, Gesture, and Space (1995). Their study (like Woll’s) involved data transcribed from videotapes of deaf presenters at an International Workshop of Deaf Researchers. They found that verbs in the International Sign presentations by a French and a British presenter were marked with inflections for person, number, and aspect in strikingly similar ways as those in fully developed sign languages (whereas typical pidgins use almost no inflectional morphology). In addition, word order variations from the typical Subject-Verb-Object order were systematic and rule-governed (object fronting and subject and/or object deletion in International Sign were more characteristic of creoles and full languages than pidgins). Furthermore, the negation system, with several different negators, each specialized in function and placement, is much more complex in International Sign than spoken language pidgins studied to date. In other words, in regard to inflections, word order variations, and negation strategies, the International Sign pidgin seems to behave more like a language than a pidgin.

Evidence of the extensive borrowing of syntactic structures from national sign languages, they noted, can be found in the fact that only signers fluent in a sign language are successful in using International Sign. International Sign may then eventually become a “universal” communication among signers, but not among all humans.

Supalla and Webb (1995) define International Sign as a pidgin, but then go on to examine how it is like spoken language pidgins, and how it is different. Like other pidgins, International Sign is used only on specific occasions (international meetings and conferences where the users know one of a large number of distinct languages, but no one language is known by all); it has no stable community of users (except for a small number of deaf people who are heavily involved in international organizations, but even they do not use it all the time); its lexicon is dramatically limited (in comparison to national sign languages); and it has no native speakers. However, International Sign is distinctively unlike other pidgins in the complexity of its grammar, which is fully as rule-governed and complex as national sign languages. Even spoken language “extended pidgins,” which are simple spoken pidgins that have come to be
used as an auxiliary language by a stable community of users, have much more limited grammatical structures than those found in International Sign.

Supalla and Webb (1995) then describe another kind of pidgin, called a koine, “where the linguistic contact is made between closely related languages sharing a similar grammar” and where “many grammatical devices from the contributing languages tend to be maintained.” If the complexity of the grammar of International Sign is a result of a similarity between the grammars of individual sign languages, as they believe, then International Sign could be classified as a koine (the question remains, however, if spoken language koines share International Sign’s lexical reduction. . .). They also mention what have become the classic reasons for similarities in the structures of sign languages studied to date: closeness to their creole origins, historical relationships, especially between European and American sign languages, and the influence of the visual/gestural modality.

**WHY DOES INTERNATIONAL SIGN WORK?**

How is it that signers who do not know each other’s sign languages can understand each other, when people of different spoken languages have so much trouble communicating without a common language? As we have seen from the literature, there are several hypotheses: historical relationships of the sign languages involved in any given communication act; the closeness to pantomimic roots of sign languages which are in fact relatively young languages, and which may even be continually re-creolized; the nature of the visual/gestural modality itself; and the hypothesized existence of an international deaf culture.

**Historical relations among sign languages**

Because of the grand publicity and subsequent proliferation of French sign language in the 19th century, International Sign was dominated by LSF for almost a century. By the late 20th century, it became obvious that ASL, itself a language in the French family of sign languages, had become the dominant influence on International Sign.14 Signers from the “British” family of sign languages (including most of the sign languages in the former British Empire and the current United Kingdom)
have generally had little problem understanding and using International Sign (even though the British is definitely a distinct family from the French/American), perhaps because of the geographic proximity of the British Isles with the European continent and the regular participation of British delegates at international meetings since the 19th century. As for other families of sign languages, certainly Japanese Sign Language (JSL) is an anchor for another distinct sign language family, and there are surely others. We have seen that signers from families other than the French and British have traditionally had more problems using and understanding International Sign, indicating that “International” Sign has traditionally been more European than truly international. That, however, is already changing as participation in international congresses and events among deaf people are finally becoming more representative of the world at large. The WFD has been seriously recruiting Board members and Experts from Asia, Africa, and South America. In addition, aid/development projects are generating more contacts between developed and developing countries around the globe: the Nordic countries’ deaf communities have been the most generous in funding and supplying deaf personnel for these projects, but other developed countries, such as Britain and the United States (whose deaf communities receive less governmental support for their work) and Japan have begun to reach out to developing countries. In addition, the fact that the WFD XIV World Congress will be held in Montreal in 2003 with spoken translations in French and English may be a factor in encouraging delegates from French-speaking countries all over the world (including a large part of West Africa) to increase their participation in the WFD. (While it might seem odd that spoken language interpretations would have such a great impact on participation in a deaf congress, consider that hearing interpreters in WFD Congresses are forced to go from English to their national sign language, and sign language interpreters in many countries do not have sufficient knowledge of English to interpret from English as a source language.) As contacts between signers from all families of sign languages in the world increase, either International Sign will evolve to accommodate the diversity, or signers from other families of sign languages will learn to accommodate the European/American traditions (ASL is now regularly being taught as a foreign language in many countries, like Japan, a fact which has only increased
the dominance of ASL in international signing, and increased
Japanese signers' participation in international conferences). 
Or, as is likely, the accommodation will flow in both directions.

Sign languages are young languages

Let's face it: sign languages started with pantomime. As far as 
we know, the oldest sign languages studied to date are only 200-
300 years old, so they may still be closer to their pantomimic 
roots than we often realize. Nancy Frishberg in her landmark 
study in 1975 showed that signs with mimetic or iconic roots 
tend to become conventionalized, or grammaticized, over time, 
and they lose their transparency or iconicity. (We see the same 
principle at work in the rapid conventionalization in International Sign.) In the evolution of a sign language, this sac-
rificing of iconicity is all for a good cause – the systematic treat-
ment of whole classes of signs is a regularization that reduces 
the language processing load. But national sign languages, and 
especially International Sign, still retain quite a lot of mimetic 
and iconic elements. The fact remains that when signing in 
International Sign in the transparent and creative way neces-
sary to insure comprehension by interlocutors from different 
families of sign languages, we rediscover the true roots of sign 
languages.

Some linguists hypothesize that sign languages are even 
younger than their history would lead us to believe because, as 
we have seen, more than 90 percent of signers do not learn sign 
language as infants with parents who are native signers, and 
that as a result sign languages are therefore constantly “re-cre-
olized” in every generation (Fischer, 1978; Newport, 1981). 
Thus, sign languages are hardly ever more than a few genera-
tions away from their pantomimic origins. Numerous studies 
have shown that children who are exposed to a truncated form 
of signing by older peers or hearing adults do begin the gram-
maticization process on their own in every generation (Wang, 
Mylander, & Goldin-Meadow, 1995; Kegl, Senghas, & Coppola, 
1999).

In studies of sign languages which are younger than the 
European and American sign languages to which we are accus-
tomed, the closeness to mimetic/iconic roots of languages in 
the visual/gestural modality becomes even more clear. In a new 
study by Aronoff, Meir, Padden, & Sandler (2001) comparing 
ASL (200 years old) with the Israeli sign language (ISL, about 60
years old), they found that the use of classifiers in ISL includes more mimetic imitations of actions with the signer’s body parts as classifiers than the more systematized and less iconic whole-entity classifiers (like ANIMAL-CROUCH or VEHICLE) typically used in ASL. Since Ted Supalla’s (1986) early description of classifiers, it has been recognized that classifiers may be used as noun classifiers like those found in Native American spoken languages (e.g., “something-thick-and-cylindrical”), but classifiers are also used in “classifier complexes” (classifier predicates) where handshapes, movements, and locations combine to include very complicated descriptions of the location and motion of objects through space (e.g., VEHICLE-MOVING-SLOWLY-UP-HILL-TURNS-LEFT-AND-RACES-DOWN-HILL-SWERVING). In his early study, Supalla (1986) had already identified “body classifiers” in which the signer’s head and body could “role-play” animate objects (e.g., CAT-SITTING-WITH-CROSSED-PAWS using paw handshapes rather than the more general ANIMAL-CROUCH morpheme). These body classifiers or “referent projections” (Engberg-Peterson, 1993), more prevalent in the younger ISL, are clearly more pantomimic than the conventionalized whole entity classifier more commonly used in ASL. (The authors do signal that ASL users still use the more mimetic body classifiers or whole body signs in storytelling or performing situations.) Aronoff et al. (2001) conclude that the iconicity available to signers in the use of verb agreement and classifier complexes leads to grammatical structures that are common to all sign languages: “the production and perception constraints, as well as the availability of iconic representation of certain conceptual categories [verb agreement and the location and motion of objects], both specific to the visuo-spatial modality, conspire together to yield the specific morphological structures that characterize sign languages, and sign languages only.” This generalization leads us to a discussion of the visual-gestural modality of sign languages.

The visual-gestural modality

What is it about the visual/gestural modality that makes us hypothesize that the medium itself may be the reason that the grammatical structures of sign languages are so similar, making cross-linguistic use of those structures easier in signing than in speaking? During the period (the 1980s) when most linguists were busy proving that sign languages functioned with the
same patterns and structures of spoken languages, Ursula Bellugi and Bill Stokoe in private conversations told me at various times that they were less interested in what makes sign languages like other languages than in what makes them special. That special something has been called a “spatial grammar,” something a bit hard to define, but whatever it is; it is a direct result of the visual/gestural modality of sign languages.

How does the visual/gestural mode allow signers the freedom to cross linguistic barriers? Putting aside political correctness and identity politics, it is obvious that sign languages express meaning much more directly than spoken languages. As Trevor Johnston (1996), an Australian linguist and CODA, describes it: “a language that has visual and spatial resources for representation has greater means for mapping onto itself those very visual and spatial qualities.” Or as Fischer (1991) notes, “Perhaps if the medium of sound were better at depicting the things it refers to, spoken language too would take advantage of the possibility of doing so.” And, in fact, when hearing people need to supplement their speech with visual descriptions, they often resort to gestures. At any rate, “going up,” “going down,” “placed under,” “acting quickly,” “acting slowly,” “being far away,” “drawing towards oneself,” “pushing away,” “next to” etc. are all spatial concepts in reality that find an exact equivalent in sign languages and even in the gestures that accompany speech – the meaning is in the form. A big ball or a little ball can be shown exactly with the hands. A cup or a log can be shown by how the hand holds it. Visual details of shape and size can be described with precision; movements and actions can be accurately imitated on the hands. The exact path of a moving vehicle or a person can be traced in the signing space. In addition, these gestures are not limited to expressing physical movements or objects: “doubt” can be expressed with alternating or fluctuating movements, “opposition” or “conflict” by two opposed straight-line actions, “substitution” by alternate curved movements, “confusion” by opposing intersecting circles, etc. (Brennan, 1993). In spoken languages, these things cannot be represented directly; they must be represented by arbitrary linguistic symbols.

Let’s return to Aronoff, Meir, Padden, & Sandler (2001). In sign languages, especially with regard to classifier predicates (motion and location of objects) and the familiar verb agreement patterns in verbs like GIVE, LOOK-AT, etc., the signing is a
very direct representation of the real world. “It is the iconicity of specific categories [verb agreement and classifier complexes], made available by the modality, that accounts for the cross linguistic similarities among different sign languages.”

To put it another way, the syntactic use of space in sign languages often does not seem much different from the “topographical” or real-world space which we are used to in everyday life. In addition, the very physical presence of the signer encourages the use of “showing” rather than telling, of acting out rather than describing. Especially if we look at the heightened “poetic” or stageworthy form of a sign language, the most articulate and creative use of the language, we see that the mapping of topographical space, use of visual details, and the description of movement are often very iconic and/or mimetic.

More mundane and less visual renditions in sign language (or even passages simply transliterated from a spoken language) may be grammatical enough to be intelligible, but they do not exploit all the advantages afforded by the visual/gestural medium.

Because the signer and the interlocutor are physically present and constantly using the space between them to refer to things about which they are talking, the use of space becomes crucial to the “painting of one’s thoughts” (in Desloges’ quaint but telling expression). Space may be used in sign languages, and in International Sign, in at least three ways that are unique to the visual/gestural modality (Emmorey, Corina, & Bellugi, 1995; Winston, 1995): Referential: the loci established may be used as references to clarify grammatical relations like subjects and objects or to role play; Topographical: the loci represent actual (or imagined) spatial relations, like “beside,” “under,” “in a line,” “in random order,” “turning right,” “going in a circle,” etc.; Structural: general concepts are associated with loci as a cohesive device to structure an entire discourse (loci then have to be kept in mind as the discourse unfolds, and the interpretation of the discourse depends on what came before). Referential shift (what we used to call “role play” or “role shift”) is a technique for showing point of view that is unique to the visual/gestural modality. A change in body position and the use of eye gaze is used for reported speech (a “direct quotation”), or, indeed, for reported thoughts, actions, emotions, or reactions. This use of the referential shift gives signing a distinctly
“acting out” flavor: not only can the signer demonstrate who is talking and what they are saying, but also what they are thinking, doing, or feeling, and how they are reacting!

The generalization that spoken languages are linear and sequential, while sign languages are three-dimensional and simultaneous, while simplistic, does have some basis in fact. While all languages make use of simultaneous bundles of information (especially “tonal” languages, but in fact all languages superimpose prosodic elements onto the word or sign sequences), the visual/gestural modality allows sign languages to make even more abundant use of simultaneous elements. The signer’s facial expressions, for example, may not only include prosodic elements, but may also operate on the syntactic level to indicate whether the signer is focusing on content (eye gaze to the referent) or on comment about the referent (eye gaze to the interlocutor). And, speaking of simultaneous elements, the mere fact that the signer has two hands that can act independently affords some distinct advantages. While one hand holds a referent at a particular locus, the other can act on it (PERSON, SOMEONE-LOOKS-AT-HER), use it for a reference (VEHICLE, SOMEONE-APPROACHES-IT-FROM-THE-SIDE), or add another referent to show the spatial relationship between the two (SHELF-SURFACE, PUT-CUP-ON). The two hands can also make some directional verbs reflexive (LOOK-AT-EACH-OTHER, GIVE-TO-EACH-OTHER). The hands acting together can also depict the size and shape of objects in a more direct way than a spoken language ever can (THICK-CYLINDRICAL-S-SHAPED-PIPE-UNDER-THE-SINK). Inflections of movement may be superimposed onto a sign (slowing or increasing the speed of movement, increasing or decreasing the length of movement, tensing or relaxing the hand or arm muscles, etc.). And while specific inflections may differ from sign language to sign language (e.g., a single versus a double movement for differentiating noun/verb pairs in ASL, as opposed to a long tense movement versus a short relaxed one to differentiate noun/verb pairs in LSF), these variations seem to be readable, at least in context, for signers from different countries communicating together.

To sum up, the visual/gestural modality offers a wealth of possibilities to signers that enable them to incorporate iconic and mimetic elements into their communication, a fact that obviously facilitates cross-language communication.
An international deaf culture

We have already noted that deaf people feel a kinship, an international solidarity, with each other around the globe. Part of the reason is their common struggle to get along in a hearing world, but part is also directly related to the visual/gestural modality they use to communicate. Communication in sign language occurs in a world (dare we say a culture?) that is very different from that of spoken language. Signing is a face-to-face activity that takes place in a given situation within a given context. Signing has no disembodied written form (aside from notation systems useful for linguists but which have not been generally accepted by signers themselves). The interlocutor is receiving messages from a signer through the signer’s body (there is no possibility of the equivalent of a disembodied word spoken in the dark). Signing requires an almost constant visual attention (looking away breaks the contact). For these reasons, Trevor Johnston (1996), the Australian linguist and CODA, goes so far as to describe the linguistic environment of communication in a visual/gestural modality in biological terms as an “Umwelt,” a world that is distinct from that of users of spoken languages – a different cultural context of communication.

The fact that sign languages are constantly re-creolized in conjunction with the fact that they have no standardizing frozen written form may also influence signers to feel freer to adapt to new or different signs or even to invent signs (nonce signs or neologisms). To the English-speaking world, that may remind us of English language usage in the 16th century before the standardization brought on by the mass media. Shakespeare took advantage of that freedom in coining new words and creating new spellings to enhance the poetry and humor of his plays. There is a kind of freedom in signing, even for ordinary conversation, to play with verbs, invent nonce signs, and poeticize the most banal of utterances which is rarely found in spoken languages.

In addition, as we have seen, deaf signers live in a world in which the majority of the population does not know sign language. Forced often into situations where they must communicate with non-signing people certainly encourages deaf people to not lose touch with the pantomimic roots of their language. And, as we have also seen, the deaf population has a large percentage of non-native users, necessitating the “need to maintain communication across a broad spectrum of levels of competence” (Aronoff, et al, 2001).
Does this face-to-face world of signing among peoples who face similar struggles as a minority in every country in which they live, so different from the hearing majority, constitute a culture? The idea of a deaf culture, and especially an international deaf culture, is still controversial among scholars, though it has become a popular notion among deaf people. At any rate, this view may contribute to the survival of International Sign, even as the ongoing grammaticization and conventionalization of sign language evolution contributes to the obscuring of the iconic and mimetic roots of individual sign languages.

**How International Sign Works**

International Sign, in fact, is not a single entity. I have always maintained that the reason it works is because it is so flexible. There are, we have seen, elements of the grammar, or use of space, movement, direction, and facial expressions, which are systematic, whether the signers in the group are Russian, Korean, Polish, Congolese, Indian, or Venezuelan. But the lexicon will vary radically depending on the make-up of the group. A group of Asian deaf people may develop quite a different set of signs from a group of Europeans, though the grammars may be very similar. What is important, I think, is the presumption that communication is possible, that the signer will do whatever needs to be done, for as long as it takes (a luxury the platform interpreter may not always have) to get the message across. Whether it is because of this idea of an international deaf culture, a solidarity in the face of common problems across the globe, or simply a presumption of multiculturalism and tolerance, the vocabulary building process across radically different lexicons, supported by common grammatical structures, manages to work.

There are several hundred signs that are considered “international” (or at least for the moment, pan-European), but they are generally learned “on the job” and are seldom taught in a formal setting. I would estimate such an international lexicon today at perhaps a thousand signs, but when one considers that the average human rarely uses over about 5000 words for everyday purposes, then 1000 seems like a pretty solid start.18 Historically, there have been few attempts to teach International Sign. It has evolved spontaneously among signers
who travel or gather at international meetings. There are, however, some basic principles which have been noted in the literature and which might help in guiding interpreters who find themselves communicating in International Sign:

Make it representational; act it out. The syntax is not much of a problem. If you are a fluent signer, and that is a prerequisite, use your “instincts” or experience with a sign language to make decisions about how to localize things in space, and move the verbs around the way you do in your own sign language. The real problem is the lexicon. Look for the most transparent mimetic or iconic sign possible, at least in the beginning. You may have to use a whole parenthetical roundabout way of describing something, a periphrasis (usually localized apart from the flow of the discourse), before you can set up a sign for it. Once a sign or periphrasis has been understood in context, the signer can do less “acting out the concept” and let it become more “arbitrary” (a “mini-evolution” or rapid conventionalization which happens naturally). It helps to know two or three different sign languages: the international signer can then just choose the sign that seems the most transparent or intelligible from one language or another. Carol Padden (1993) writes that the biggest mystery of International Sign is knowing “which signs of your own language will work and which ones you must borrow from another sign language and which ones must be gestures.” The consolation is that “everyone understands and doesn’t understand at the same time, and,” according to Padden (1993), “if I went slowly and followed my ‘instincts,’ they would understand nearly all the time.”

Remember, you are not dealing with that elusive and impossible universal language; you have most of the techniques of your own sign language at your disposal. Stephen Pinker in The Language Instinct (1993) writes about “depicting a concept so that receivers can apprehend the meaning in the form. The process is so challenging to the ingenuity, so comically unreliable [for non-signers, I would add], that we have made it into party games like Pictionary and charades.” International Sign may seem like charades sometimes. It is slower and much less efficient than a national sign language. Be patient. Keep at it. Travel a lot. Associate with deaf people on their own turf.

When in doubt, look to deaf International Sign users who have experience. Trust them. They have been around, and know what works, and what doesn’t. Pay close attention, and ask!

When interpreting, and you don’t have the luxury of asking
a deaf person, use the sign you know. You can start by exaggerating its iconic roots, if it has any, and you might want to “unmark” the handshape to make it less specifically a sign from your sign language, then hope that it is understood in the context. The classic example is the ASL classifier for “vehicle,” with thumb, index, and middle fingers extended. If you don’t unmark the handshape down to a flat hand (palm down), signers from other countries will be wondering what the thumb sticking up might represent, and why there are two fingers at the front of this thing that is moving! Also, remember that sometimes the sign established in the group will depend on where you are at the time. Signers often defer to the sign in the local deaf community where the meeting takes place.

Watch your audience or interlocutor carefully. Their feedback is precious. There is a sort of constant eye dialogue with them: “You got it? Good.” “Not that, huh? How about this?” Except in the most formal of conferences, remember that you are building a lexicon as you go. It works best if you are doing it as a team. If a sign from another sign language is used in the group and understood in context, appropriate it for your own use. Once a lexical item is established in a particular group, then remember it; use it – don’t waste everyone’s time by setting up another sign with a new periphrasis. There is a constant adaptation to your audience. You can think of it as a kind of “foreigner talk”: how would you sign it if you were signing it to someone fluent in another sign language, but just learning yours? Articulate the signs fully; exaggerate the iconic elements; be clear; don’t “mumble.”

Personalize everything you can. As Carol Padden (1993) suggests, tell it as a narrative. Play the characters and give yourself the chance to “act out” things like reactions so you won’t get stuck having to find a sign to describe the reactions. McKee & Napier (1999), from New Zealand, say it this way: “Re-telling events from an embodied perspective is a feature of signed discourse in general . . . [while] a language such as English . . . tends to describe and objectify events and states. (For example an English speaker can say ‘I felt affection for her’ which removes the action somewhat from the agent, compared to how a signer would use a verb and demonstrate the emotion to a greater or lesser degree on the face.) The use of role-taking in international interpreting allows the interpreter to freely make use of a non-lexical repertoire of tools for conveying meaning.”
And, as we have seen, this referential shift serves for role-playing of quotations, thoughts, actions, emotions, or reactions to a referent established at a particular locus. The International Sign maxim is: don’t tell it, show it!

Use common experiences. Know your audience as much as possible, and take advantage of what they have in common: if there is no international sign for “party,” for example, you could sign “drinking and dancing same as last night across the hall,” and so on.

Break the message down into the essentials. Throw out the chaff and keep the wheat. Take a stand on what is essential and what you can get by without. Sometimes I think we’re afraid to make judgments about what is important. Some of us think our code of ethics doesn’t allow us to drop anything or change the message in any way. But we do have to decide what is important, even when interpreting every day between our sign language and our spoken language. For example, faced with the phrase “recreation program,” an interpreter might be tempted to translate it with either the sign that we gloss ENJOY or the sign glossed PLAY and then stick on the sign PROGRAM. In International Sign, that would be cheating . . . describe the specific recreation program in question: EVERY WEEK BASKETBALL or EVERY DAY AFTERNOON PLAY CARDS. In International Sign, we need to break things down into what they really mean in a given context for a given audience. Of course we know that we are not interpreting words, but ideas and meanings, but interpreting in International Sign will certainly force an interpreter to go straight to the heart of the message. One of the important things we interpreters can learn from International Sign is that you can’t cheat – you have to go for the meaning!

Be careful of register. For formal platform interpreting, International Sign can be a challenge. There are times when the creativity and cleverness required by International Sign can provoke laughter in the deaf audience when the speaker did not intend it. If, for example, your periphrasis to establish a lexical item elicits laughter (and it may be only fair, because the deaf audience may be missing a few hearing jokes or plays on words in other parts of the speech), then you can signal your audience that the humor is in the periphrasis, not in the speaker’s propos by snapping back to a neutral or serious facial expression and posture as soon as the message in International Sign is understood.
CONCLUSION

In reviewing the historical records to which I have access, I contend that some form of International Sign has been in use for at least 150 years, though we can also speculate that international signing has been practiced among deaf people traveling between countries in Europe and elsewhere for much longer. The determination of the age of international signing is complicated by the fact that older historical records mention “sign language” without referring to individual national sign languages, so it is difficult to know when signers were using a national sign language or when they were using the kind of adaptations to foreign signers (“foreigner talk”) that are at the core of International Sign. It is generally thought that the oldest of modern sign languages are only about 200 or 250 years old, but some records indicate that LSF and BSL may even be older. The question is complicated by the fact that we are not sure from the records when “home signs” among a few signers began evolving into full sign languages used by a stable community of deaf people. Certainly, by 1850, there were separate national sign languages in several countries, and deaf people in Europe were gathering in international meetings and communicating efficiently with some form of International Sign. Through the international meetings sponsored by the CISS and the WFD, and, recently, the International Workshop of Deaf Researchers, a fairly standardized and formal form of International Sign has developed and is used periodically in their meetings. A more informal form of International Sign is used any time two or more deaf people from different countries meet each other while traveling.

International Sign is not a language. It has no stable community of users who depend on it for daily communication. It is a pidgin, although research has shown that its grammatical structures are much more complex than the typical spoken language pidgin.

While today’s International Sign is perceived to be highly influenced by European and American sign languages, signers from other continents are becoming more present at international deaf meetings, and their influence will be felt as International Sign becomes more truly international.

The modern literature on International Sign indicates that there are several reasons why International Sign continues to
be fairly effective: a history of international contacts among deaf people from different countries (especially in Europe and North America); the similarities of grammatical structures across sign languages due to the visual/gestural modality; the common experiences and common struggles of deaf people in most countries (which some consider to be the basis, with the similarities in sign language grammars, of an international deaf culture); the relative age of sign languages when compared to older spoken languages (and the concomitant closeness to their iconic and mimetic roots); and the hypothesis that sign languages stay closer to those iconic/mimetic roots both because of the process of constant re-creolization and because of the frequent need of deaf people to communicate pantomimically with the non-signing majorities in their own countries.

After over 40 years of intensive research on sign languages across the globe and 20 years of research on International Sign, we may be in a position today to draw some conclusions about the human capacity for language and about the special contributions made to the field by deaf people. This very special group of people has more to teach hearing-and-speaking people than we realize. Deaf people’s presumption that cross-language communication is possible, their willingness to take the time, do whatever is necessary to communicate, are precious lessons in a world sorely in need of direct and honest human exchanges. International Sign may never be the universal language sought after throughout human history, but it is a fascinating glimpse into the possibility of world wide solidarity.

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REFERENCES


FOOTNOTES

1 In this article, I make no distinction between persons who are culturally Deaf (with an upper case D) and those who are simply audiologically deaf (in lower case). I know, of course, that many writers in our field view the distinction as important, but the practice forces the writer to make judgments about whether the D/deaf persons written about are culturally deaf or not, and I am not always comfortable making those judgments.

2 Actually, the traditional idea of the deaf-mute or village idiot being rejected from society may have less basis in reality than we have generally thought. In a society where the vast majority of the populace had never set foot in a school and could neither read nor write, some deaf people may have been fairly well integrated into the social fabric doing useful manual chores at which they were particularly adept.

3 It was in the 1630s that the Kentish emigrés sailed to Massachusetts. The move to Martha’s Vineyard happened from the 1660s to the 1690s. Eventually, deaf children from Martha’s Vineyard were sent to Clerc’s American Asylum in Hartford in the 1820s and 30s (Groce, 1987).


5 As much as the French have always prized eloquence in their precious French language, this contradictory element of mistrust of spoken language has also been strong in French culture, from Rousseau’s era to the present. In the late 1970s, in the early days of IVT, the French deaf theater, Parisian
avant-garde audiences flocked to deaf productions performed in gestures with no voice interpretations: the critics were enthralled by this new exotic “non verbal” theatrical language.

François Truffaut’s film “The Wild Child” is well known; Harlan Lane’s “The Wild Boy of Aveyron” (1976) goes into great depth about the experiences of Victor, the wild child, who was, in fact, not deaf. He was captured in 1800 and sent to Epée’s deaf school in Paris, where he was not allowed to mingle with the deaf students (he never learned to sign or to speak).

In 1815, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet traveled to London to investigate teaching methods for the deaf, with the aim of establishing a school in Connecticut. Frustrated by the veil of secrecy imposed by the Braidwood family at London’s Braidwood school, he discovered that Epée’s successor, the abbé Sicard, was giving a demonstration in London of the French method of teaching the deaf. It was there that Gallaudet met Sicard and Clerc. Gallaudet witnessed the touching scene of Clerc’s meeting with the English deaf students, and though their signs must have been different from his LSF, they had no trouble communicating. One of Sicard’s party in London, de Ladebat (1815), wrote the following account of Clerc’s visit: “As soon as Clerc beheld this sight [the children at dinner], his face became animated; he was as agitated as a traveler of sensibility would be on meeting all of a sudden in distant regions, a colony of his countrymen ... Clerc approached them. He made signs and they answered him by signs. This unexpected communication caused a most delicious sensation in them and was a scene of expression that gave us the most heartfelt satisfaction.” Whether Clerc was using an adapted version of LSF or a version of International Sign is unclear, but this was certainly some kind of international sign communication.
When The Mind Hears (Lane 1984) recounts a multitude of events related to the international struggle of deaf people for the recognition of their sign languages, a leitmotif throughout the book.

My discovery of International Sign in the 1970s was marked by the realization that many of the international signs we were using were, in fact, French, or very close to French.

International Sign interpreters who are themselves deaf have proved since 1987 that they are oftentimes the best at getting the message across in International Sign. Gil Eastman, Marie Phillip, Steve Walker, M.J. Bienvenu, and Clark Denmark, among others, have excelled in the field. When interpreting spoken text from the platform, these interpreters, of course, are supported by hearing interpreters who can “feed” them in their native sign language (the technique of the hearing feed interpreter is itself a burgeoning and complex field).

That an article on International Sign would appear in a speech therapists’ journal might seem ironic, but in the nascent French deaf movement, speech therapists were some of the first hearing people to realize that the pure oral approach was not working, and they were filling the early sign language classes we were organizing at the deaf theater in Paris.

Some linguists prefer to call rhetorical questions focus structures because they are used for emphasizing focus in a discourse rather than for the rhetorical flourishes for which they are used in a language like English.

When children acquire language from non-native users of the language, as is the case with the vast majority of sign language users even today, the result is a creole. While most spoken creoles are passed along thereafter from parents to children (native users to native users), like Haitian Creole, the
percentage of signers acquiring a signed language from native users will surely remain low (around 8.3% in the US, according to the 1999-2000 Annual Survey of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children from the Gallaudet Research Institute), creating a situation where sign languages are constantly re-creolized. Thus, sign languages are hardly ever more than a few generations away from their pidgin/creole origins.

The current dominance of ASL in International Sign may be partially related to the political and economic hegemony of the U.S. in today's world, but it is more probably a result of a) the exporting of American signs by foreign deaf students who studied at Gallaudet and returned home with the idea that ASL was better, or more complete than their indigenous sign languages (Foster, a hard of hearing graduate of Gallaudet, not only spread American signs in his native Nigeria, but all over Africa on his missionary journeys), b) the use of American signs by well-intentioned volunteers, like Peace Corps volunteers, all over the world, and c) the early appearance of linguistic research on ASL and the deaf movement of the 1960s in the U.S. As the first sign language to be extensively studied and validated by the scientific and educational communities in the modern era, the international deaf community saw ASL early on as a “rich” and “complete” language to be emulated. It should be noted that once the myth of ASL as “richer” or “more complete” than other sign languages had been fairly widely accepted in the developing world, the myth became self-perpetuating.

In addition to being a linguist, Nancy is also a practicing interpreter, one of the early presidents of NYC Metro RID, and the author of Interpreting: An Introduction (RID 1988).

This is a highly controversial hypothesis, and linguists are still arguing the balance of real-world representation in sign languages with the physical and grammatical constraints imposed by individual sign languages.
Johnston chose the term *umwelt* “because of its biological, evolutionary, and ecological associations . . . [describing] a particular perceptual-behavioral complex that represents the organism as evolved in symbiosis with its environment (cf. Bühler’s *Umfeld*, 1982).

The interpreters in New York who regularly interpret Broadway shows like to joke that we only use about 12 signs in different combinations for any given show. While it is an obvious exaggeration, it is a telling joke . . .