

# what types of sign language are there

**\*\*Exploring the Diverse World of Sign Languages: What Types of Sign Language Are There?\*\***

**what types of sign language are there** is a question that often arises for those curious about the rich and varied ways deaf and hard-of-hearing communities communicate around the world. Sign language is not a singular, universal system but a vibrant tapestry of languages, each with its own unique grammar, vocabulary, and cultural nuances. Understanding the different types of sign language offers fascinating insights into human communication and highlights the importance of linguistic diversity.

## Understanding the Basics: What Is Sign Language?

Before diving into the different types of sign language, it's helpful to understand what sign language actually is. Unlike spoken languages that rely on sound, sign languages use hand gestures, facial expressions, body posture, and movement to convey meaning. These languages are natural, fully developed languages with their own grammar and syntax. Importantly, sign languages are not simply signed versions of spoken languages; for example, American Sign Language (ASL) is entirely distinct from English.

## What Types of Sign Language Are There? An Overview

Sign languages can vary widely not only between countries but also within regions. Each sign language evolves naturally within its community and reflects cultural and social influences. Here's a deeper look into some of the main types of sign languages you might encounter:

### National Sign Languages

National sign languages are the most recognized and widely used sign systems within specific countries. These languages often develop out of the community's needs and have standardized use in education and media.

### American Sign Language (ASL)

ASL is one of the most commonly known sign languages, predominantly used in the United States and parts of Canada. Despite English-speaking countries, ASL is linguistically unrelated to English; it has roots connected to French Sign Language (LSF) due to historical influences. ASL uses a combination of hand shapes, movements, and facial expressions to communicate complex ideas.

### British Sign Language (BSL)

BSL is used mainly in the United Kingdom and differs significantly from ASL.

It has its own unique grammar and vocabulary. For instance, BSL uses a two-handed alphabet for fingerspelling, unlike ASL's one-handed system. BSL reflects the culture and social identity of the British Deaf community.

## **Australian Sign Language (Auslan)**

Auslan shares similarities with BSL due to historical ties but has developed its own distinct characteristics. It's the primary sign language used by the Deaf communities in Australia and parts of New Zealand. The language reflects the local culture and has unique signs that differ from its British counterpart.

## **Regional and Local Sign Languages**

Within countries, there can be multiple regional sign languages or dialects. These variations arise from historical isolation or cultural differences within Deaf communities.

## **Mexican Sign Language (LSM) and Regional Variants**

Mexico has its own sign language, LSM, which is used nationwide but varies slightly from region to region. These regional differences can include variations in hand shapes or vocabulary, much like spoken dialects.

## **Japanese Sign Language (JSL)**

JSL is used across Japan and is notable for including mouthing (silent articulation of spoken Japanese words alongside signs) as part of its communication system. It is a fully developed language that differs greatly from other East Asian sign languages like Korean Sign Language (KSL) or Chinese Sign Language (CSL).

## **International Sign Language and Communication Systems**

While there is no single universal sign language, International Sign (IS) serves as a pidgin-like system used at international events such as the World Federation of the Deaf conferences or the Deaflympics. IS borrows signs from various national systems to facilitate cross-cultural communication but is not considered a fully developed language.

## **Signed Exact English (SEE) and Other Manually Coded Systems**

Besides natural sign languages, there are manually coded systems like Signed

Exact English (SEE), which aim to represent spoken language word-for-word using signs. These systems are often used in educational settings to support literacy in spoken languages but are not natural languages themselves.

## **Unique and Lesser-Known Sign Languages Around the World**

The world is home to hundreds of unique sign languages, many of which remain lesser-known outside their communities.

### **Brazilian Sign Language (Libras)**

Libras is the official sign language of Brazil and recognized by the government. It has its own grammar and incorporates rich facial expressions and body language. Libras emerged from indigenous sign systems and has grown into a vibrant language.

### **French Sign Language (LSF)**

As one of the oldest documented sign languages, LSF has influenced many modern sign languages, including ASL. It continues to be used in France and parts of Francophone countries, with its own evolving lexicon.

### **Other Indigenous and Village Sign Languages**

In some isolated communities, unique village sign languages have developed, often in places with a high incidence of hereditary deafness. Examples include Adamorobe Sign Language in Ghana and Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language in Israel. These languages provide remarkable examples of how sign language can develop naturally within small populations.

## **Why Knowing What Types of Sign Language Are There Matters**

Recognizing the diversity of sign languages is important for several reasons. For one, it promotes respect for Deaf culture worldwide, honoring the unique identities of each community. It also facilitates better communication and education strategies tailored to the needs of different Deaf populations.

Moreover, knowing about various sign languages can be invaluable for travelers, educators, interpreters, and advocates. For example, a sign language interpreter working internationally must understand the differences between sign systems to provide accurate interpretation.

## Tips for Learning and Appreciating Different Sign Languages

If you're interested in learning sign language or simply want to appreciate its diversity, here are some practical tips:

- **Start with a widely used language:** American Sign Language or British Sign Language are good starting points due to the abundance of resources and community support.
- **Engage with Deaf communities:** Immersing yourself in local Deaf culture can deepen your understanding far beyond vocabulary and grammar.
- **Use multimedia resources:** Online videos, apps, and interactive courses can help you grasp the nuances of different sign languages.
- **Understand the cultural context:** Each sign language reflects its community's values and history, so learning about the culture enriches your language skills.
- **Be patient and open-minded:** Just like spoken languages, sign languages take time to learn, and each one has unique structures that may challenge your assumptions.

## The Ever-Evolving Nature of Sign Languages

Sign languages continue to evolve as communities grow and interact. New signs emerge, and languages adapt to new technologies and cultural shifts. For example, signs for modern concepts like "internet," "smartphone," or "social media" vary widely and are created dynamically within communities.

In this way, the question of what types of sign language are there is not only about the present but also about the ongoing story of human communication. Each sign language represents a living, breathing culture that enriches the world's linguistic heritage.

Exploring sign languages opens a window into the creativity and resilience of Deaf communities worldwide, reminding us that language is far more than words—it's a vital bridge connecting people across all boundaries.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What are the most commonly used types of sign language worldwide?

The most commonly used types of sign language worldwide include American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL), and International Sign (IS). Each has its own unique grammar and vocabulary.

### Is American Sign Language (ASL) the same as British Sign Language (BSL)?

No, American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL) are different languages with distinct signs and grammar, despite both being used in English-speaking countries.

## **What is International Sign and how is it used?**

International Sign (IS) is a pidgin sign language used in international meetings, events, and by the deaf community worldwide to communicate when users do not share a common national sign language.

## **Are sign languages universal or do they differ by country?**

Sign languages are not universal; they differ by country and region, just like spoken languages. Each country often has its own unique sign language.

## **What are some examples of regional sign languages other than ASL and BSL?**

Examples of regional sign languages include Auslan (Australian Sign Language), French Sign Language (LSF), Japanese Sign Language (JSL), and Chinese Sign Language (CSL).

## **Can you explain the difference between signed exact English and natural sign languages?**

Signed Exact English (SEE) is a manually coded form of English that follows English grammar and syntax, while natural sign languages, like ASL or BSL, have their own unique grammar and vocabulary independent of spoken languages.

## **How do indigenous sign languages differ from mainstream sign languages?**

Indigenous sign languages are developed within specific indigenous communities and may differ significantly in structure and vocabulary from mainstream national sign languages, reflecting their unique cultural contexts.

## **Are there sign languages specifically designed for particular groups or regions?**

Yes, there are sign languages developed for specific groups or regions, such as Martha's Vineyard Sign Language in the US historically, and Kata Kolok in Bali, Indonesia, which developed within local deaf communities.

## **Additional Resources**

### **Exploring the Diversity of Sign Languages Around the World**

**what types of sign language are there** is a question that invites a deeper understanding of the rich linguistic landscape within Deaf communities globally. Sign language is not a single, universal system; rather, it

encompasses a variety of distinct languages, each shaped by cultural, regional, and historical influences. This article delves into the different types of sign language, highlighting their unique characteristics, geographic distribution, and the important role they play in communication and identity for millions of Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.

## The Linguistic Diversity of Sign Languages

Sign languages are fully developed natural languages that use visual-manual modality to convey meaning. Unlike spoken languages, they rely on hand shapes, facial expressions, body movements, and spatial grammar. Understanding what types of sign language are there involves recognizing that sign languages are independent from the spoken languages of their regions. For example, American Sign Language (ASL) and British Sign Language (BSL) differ significantly, despite both countries primarily speaking English.

The diversity in sign languages is often influenced by historical migration patterns, Deaf education policies, and community interactions. Some sign languages have evolved organically within Deaf communities over centuries, while others have been shaped by formal schooling or contact with other sign languages.

## Major Types of Sign Languages

When investigating what types of sign language are there, several prominent sign languages come to the forefront due to their widespread use and cultural significance.

- **American Sign Language (ASL):** Predominantly used in the United States and parts of Canada, ASL is one of the most studied and widespread sign languages globally. It originated from French Sign Language (LSF) and indigenous sign systems in the early 19th century.
- **British Sign Language (BSL):** BSL is distinct from ASL despite both being used in English-speaking countries. It has its own grammar and lexicon, with roots tracing back to indigenous British sign systems.
- **Chinese Sign Language (CSL):** Used across China, CSL has regional variations and is influenced by spoken Mandarin and Cantonese languages in terms of fingerspelling and lexicon.
- **French Sign Language (LSF):** One of the earliest documented sign languages, LSF has influenced many other sign languages, including ASL, and remains widely used in France.
- **Japanese Sign Language (JSL):** JSL features unique grammatical structures and incorporates facial expressions that carry significant linguistic meaning.

These examples represent just a fraction of the over 300 documented sign languages worldwide, underscoring the extensive variety within this communicative form.

## **Regional and Cultural Variations**

Sign languages often reflect the cultural nuances and regional dialects of their users. For example, the sign language used in urban centers can differ from that in rural areas due to varying social networks and historical influences. Furthermore, some countries have multiple sign languages or dialects used by different ethnic groups or communities.

A notable example is the situation in Australia, where Auslan (Australian Sign Language) is the dominant language, but Indigenous Australian sign languages also exist, serving as cultural and communication tools within Aboriginal communities. These Indigenous sign languages are often deeply embedded in traditional practices and carry significant cultural heritage.

## **Comparing Sign Languages: Structure and Usage**

Understanding what types of sign language are there also involves comparing their linguistic features. While all sign languages share some universal traits—such as the use of space and non-manual markers—their grammar, syntax, and vocabulary can vary widely.

### **Grammar and Syntax Differences**

Sign languages exhibit varying syntactic orders. ASL typically follows a topic-comment structure, where the topic is introduced first, followed by a comment or description. In contrast, some sign languages like Japanese Sign Language employ a subject-object-verb (SOV) order, mirroring the spoken Japanese language's syntax.

### **Fingerspelling and Lexical Borrowing**

Fingerspelling systems, which represent the letters of a written language, differ among sign languages. For example, ASL uses a one-handed fingerspelling alphabet, while BSL utilizes a two-handed system. This variation affects how proper nouns and loanwords are incorporated into the language.

Some sign languages borrow signs from others through contact or education, leading to lexical borrowing. For instance, ASL has incorporated signs from LSF, and younger generations may introduce regional or international signs influenced by media and technology.

## **Emerging and Village Sign Languages**

Beyond established national sign languages, there are emerging and village sign languages that provide insight into the natural development of language.

## **Village Sign Languages**

In some isolated communities with a high incidence of hereditary deafness, unique village sign languages have developed. These languages often arise spontaneously and are used by both Deaf and hearing members of the community. Examples include Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language in Israel and Adamorobe Sign Language in Ghana.

These languages tend to have simpler grammatical structures compared to national sign languages but are rich in cultural expression. Their study is crucial for linguists understanding language genesis and evolution.

## **Emerging Sign Languages**

New sign languages continue to emerge, particularly in urban centers where Deaf individuals from diverse backgrounds converge. For instance, Nicaraguan Sign Language developed in the late 20th century within schools for the Deaf and has been extensively studied as a model of language creation.

## **Technological and Educational Impact on Sign Language Diversity**

Technological advancements and educational policies significantly influence what types of sign language are there and how they evolve.

## **Impact of Deaf Education**

Historically, oralism—an educational approach emphasizing lip-reading and speech—suppressed sign language use in many countries, limiting the spread and recognition of various sign languages. However, the rise of bilingual-bicultural education models has promoted the use of native sign languages in Deaf education, boosting their prestige and transmission.

## **Technology and Sign Language Accessibility**

Digital communication tools, such as video calls and sign language apps, are bridging geographical gaps, allowing sign language users to connect and share linguistic innovations. Social media platforms also facilitate the exchange of signs and cultural content, impacting sign language usage and awareness globally.

## **Conclusion: A Complex and Vibrant Linguistic Landscape**

The question of what types of sign language are there reveals a complex mosaic of languages, each with unique origins, structures, and roles within

their communities. From globally recognized languages like ASL and BSL to lesser-known village sign languages, these languages not only facilitate communication but also embody rich cultural identities. As awareness and research grow, so does appreciation for the diversity and significance of sign languages worldwide.

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