

Understanding Fingerspelling and Loan Signs

Interpreting I (ASL 3310)

American Sign Language
Utah Valley State College

After this discussion, you will

- Better understand:
- 1) a brief history, the roles and purposes of fingerspelling in ASL;
 - 2) how to spot, avoid, and correct common errors in fingerspelling production;
 - 3) and understand the existence and usage of fingerspelled loan signs.

1) a. Where did fingerspelling come from?

- Sign language history, unfortunately, is not well-documented. What is known:
- 300–800 AD: Despite a vow of silence, Benedictine monks develop a manual system to communicate
 - c.1550: Pedro Ponce de León creates a gestural system to aid student-teacher interaction; is first conventionalized sign language system?
 - c.1600: Juan Pablo Martin Bonet “claims” to invent a system intending to associate handshapes with sound; Myth: Bonet invented the manual alphabet, Fact: he never used it

- c.1750s: The Abbe de L'Epee founds the world's first school for the Deaf; uses fingerspelling to teach students French
- c.1900s: Educators use the “Rochester Method;” essentially fingerspelling and speech only—no accompanying signs

Why is this history important?

- Did Deaf people already have access to or even create a manual alphabet on their own? Historical evidence seems to show that they did not.
- Fingerspelling's initial intended usage was to teach speech to Deaf people.

1) b. So why do we use fingerspelling? What is it? What is it for?

- Although it has been debated for many years whether or not fingerspelling actually is ASL, Deaf people/ASL signers do use the manual alphabet on a regular basis.
- The American Manual Alphabet consists of 26 handshapes (two of which require extra movement, J and Z) and visually represent a letter of the spoken American/English language.

Generally, Deaf people/ASL signers use fingerspelling to communicate proper nouns:

- personal names
- streets
- book/movie titles
- brand names
- *and borrowed English words/phrases (aka fingerspelled loan signs or words. See 3: Language Contact and Loan Signs)*

*However, Deaf people/ASL signers *do not* use fingerspelling to communicate words they do not know the sign for. This is a typical error beginner signers/interpreters make.

2) How can I learn to fingerspell better? And how in the world can am I ever supposed to read fingerspelling when it's so fast?

- Once you know the principles and rules that govern fingerspelling, your only obstacle is practice. Remember the three C's:
- *Configuration.*
 - a. Fingerspelling is the combination of “letters;” look for familiar shapes and combinations, not individual letters:
H-o-w-h-a-r-d-i-s-i-t-t-o-r-e-a-d-t-h-i-s?
Howhardisitstoreadthis?
How hard is it to read this?
 - b. As hearing people do with speech, look for *combinations of letters* in signing:
 - diphthongs (sh, th, ing, tion, ness);
 - prefixes/suffixes (pre, pro, re, ad)
 - c. Look for *wordshape*: speech that *sounds* more dynamic is easily recognizable; fingerspelling that *looks* more dynamic is easily recognizable.

- *Closure.*
 - a. Anticipate fingerspelled words by identifying key shapes that you know:
is it hard to read this?
Is it hard to read this?
Having seen these shapes before, you can fill in the holes:
 - Use a first/last (Y) method
 - See familiar couplet & triplet shapes
 - Use knowledge of the context
 - Anticipate what is coming next
- *Context.*
Pay attention to the context and situation where the fingerspelled word is used:
 - timeframe
 - content matter
 - gender/familial relationship

2) How can I learn to fingerspell better? And how in the world can am I ever supposed to read fingerspelling when it's so fast? (continued)

- *Variations.*
Remember fingerspelling (and ASL in general) has variations. Note common errors and look for and recognize variations (dialects):

-D/F:	-E:
-G:	-I/Y:
-J:	-K/P:
-M:	-N:
-TH:	-Z:

- *Assimilation and transition.*
 - a. Fingerspelled letters affect other spelled letters next to it. To learn quicker, more natural-looking fingerspelling, recognize transitions between letters.
-Examples:
- *Other tips/techniques.*
 - Fingerspell words *after* the sign
 - Use states' ASL abbreviations, *not* PO
 - Initials are slightly circled, held longer
 - Misspell? make the error, don't "erase"

3) Why do I often see Deaf people fingerspelling English words? Why do they seem to skip letters and spell them so fast?

(aka Language Contact, Loan Signs, and Lexicalized Fingerspelling)



Figure 1: #DO-DO
Depending on facial expression and movement, #DO can take on several meanings



Figure 2: The signs WHAT and WHEN

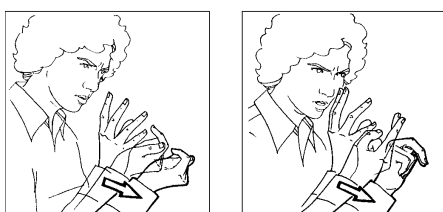


Figure 3: The loan signs #WHAT and #WHEN

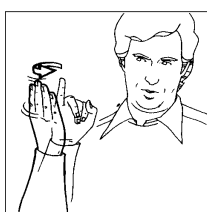


Figure 4: The loan sign #JOB

You need to understand that languages which "contact," or are in proximity to another, borrow from one other:

- Language borrowing occurs when two or more languages are "in contact" with each other; "*contact*" may be *geographical or through media and/or literature*
- Language borrowing is frequently directional: lower social status/minority languages borrow from higher social status/majority languages

Language contact between ASL and English becomes complicated because:

- ASL and English exist in two different media: visual and auditory
- Deaf people/ASL signers dwell *among* a majority rather than in a specific geographic area

So, ASL borrows from English through fingerspelling. Researchers have decided there are two kinds of fingerspelling:

- *Full fingerspelling:* each letter is clearly and more slowly made, signer uses supporting arm, produced slightly directionally (RH: L→R, LH: R→L)
- *Lexicalized fingerspelling:* borrowed from majority language, uses directional inflection.

Fingerspelled loan signs (or lexicalized fingerspelling), therefore, lose traditional fingerspelling properties and, instead, function as an ASL sign:

- 1) condense clear, individual lettershapes into easy-to-make ASL handshapes and/or keep the first and last letters while omitting the middle letters;
- 2) add directional movement; and
- 3) include vital cultural information.

Fingerspelled loan signs are indicated by a pound sign (#) when writing ASL.

Reasons for and examples of loan signs (lexicalized fingerspelling):

- *Maintain sign clarity and meaning.*
 - a. Signs may require two-hand production and are unclear when signed with one hand. Loan signs maintain clarity and meaning while reducing effort.
-Examples: #KILL, #CAR, #FIX, #BREAD
- *Determine who is knowledgeable of ASL, Deaf people, and/or a given culture.*
Many signs have a perfectly valid one- or two-hand production, but are fingerspelled to hide information or determine who is a proficient ASL user. Traditionally, Deaf people are over-protective of ASL; it is the very root of what makes a Deaf person Deaf.
-Examples: #WHAT, #WHEN (figures 2, 3), #HURT, #SURE, #OUT, #DOG, #TOAST
- *To satisfy ASL grammatical requirements.*
 - a. Loan signs take on a movement to give the sign a different meaning.
-Examples: #BACK, #ALL, SAY-#NO-TO, #DO-DO (figure 1), #GO
- *Emphasis and equality.*
 - a. The schooling experience of many Deaf people is of language oppression, a reminder that ASL is somehow inferior to English. Deaf people have, instead of defaulting to an initialized sign, created fingerspelled versions of their English counterparts.
-Examples: #WILL, #FULL, #DEAF, #WILD, #TAN
- *Other loan signs.*
 - Examples: #JOB (figure 4), #BANK, #EASY, #EARLY, #SOON, #BUSY, #COOL, #OK, #SO, #HA, #NG, #OR, #EX, #CLUB