

# The Linguistics of British Sign Language

## An Introduction

This is the first detailed explanation of the way British Sign Language works and is the product of many years' experience of research and teaching of sign linguistics. It assumes no previous knowledge of linguistics or sign language, and it is not structured around traditional headings such as phonology, morphology, and syntax. Instead it is set out in such a way as to help learners and their teachers understand the linguistic principles behind the language.

There are sections on BSL and also on the use of BSL, including variation, social acceptability in signing, and poetry and humour in BSL. Technical terms and linguistic jargon are kept to a minimum, and the text contains many examples from English, BSL, and other spoken and sign languages. The book is amply illustrated and contains exercises to encourage further thought on many of the topics covered, as well as a reading list for further study.

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A 90-minute video has been produced containing specially designed exercise material to accompany the book. The video is available from CACDP, Durham University Science Park, Block 4, Mountjoy Research Centre, Stockton Road, Durham DH1 3UZ.

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## An Introduction

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RACHEL SUTTON-SPENCE AND BENCIE WOLL



Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
 978-0-521-63718-3 — The Linguistics of British Sign Language: An Introduction  
 Rachel Sutton-Spence, Bencie Woll  
 Frontmatter  
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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,  
 a department of the University of Cambridge.

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521637183](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521637183)

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First published 1999

17th printing 2018

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication data*

Sutton-Spence, Rachel.

The linguistics of British Sign Language: an introduction /  
 Rachel Sutton-Spence and Bencie Woll.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 63142 4 (hardback). – ISBN 0 521 63718 X (paperback)

1. British Sign Language – Handbooks, manuals, etc. 2. Sign  
 language – Study and teaching. 3. Deaf – Means of communication –  
 Great Britain. I. Woll, B. (Bencie) II. Title.

HV2474.S97 1998

419–dc21 98–20588 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-63142-6 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-63718-3 Paperback

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*For Kerry Sutton-Spence and Harry Sieratzki*

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people: Mike George for the photographs of handshapes in the Conventions section; Bridget Peace for the drawing of the manual alphabet; Tasnim Ahmed, Tina Christou, Martin Hughes, Paul Scott, Shainal Vasant, Adam Walker, and Fiona Wood, students at the Centre for Deaf Studies, who modelled the sign illustrations; Frank Blades, Joseph Collins, and David Jackson for their assistance with the preparation and computerisation of the illustrations; David Brien for his kind permission to use the illustration conventions from the *BSL/English Dictionary*; Little, Brown for their kind permission to reproduce the extract from *Body of Evidence*, by Patricia Cornwell on pp. 126–7; Bryn Brooks and the BBC *See Hear* programme for providing the videos of Dorothy Miles's poems; Don Reed, for his permission to quote Dorothy Miles's poems; Daniel Jones for his assistance with the preparation of the manuscript; our colleagues at the Centre for Deaf Studies at the University of Bristol and Clinical Communication Studies at City University, in particular Frances Elton, for her comments on an earlier draft, and Hal Draper and Paddy Ladd, for their assistance with chapter 14. Finally, we would like to thank all the students we have taught sign linguistics to over the years for their input, suggestions, and comments.

Our apologies to anyone whom we have inadvertently omitted from this list.

## Conventions used

Throughout this book we will frequently refer to BSL signs. Because of variation in BSL, a sign we describe may be different from one you know. There is no currently accepted, widely used writing system for BSL and we need to adopt a system for representing signs on paper. There are several sophisticated, accurate systems for representing signs from any language on paper ('notation' systems). However, these systems are complex and take time to learn. In this book we will not use these notation systems.

### GLOSSING

We will use glossing as the main method of describing BSL signs. When we gloss a sign, we write its meaning using an English word or words, but it should be remembered that we are referring to the BSL sign and not to the English word used to write it down.

There are several conventions that are observed in the glossing used in this book:

- (1) When we write the meaning of a sign using an English word, we write it in capital letters. For example, to write the sign that means 'cat', we write CAT.
- (2) Many signs cannot be glossed by a single English word, because there is no exact English translation. In such cases, we write several English words to give the meaning of the sign, but each word is joined by a hyphen to show that we are referring to a single sign. For example, if we want to sign 'don't like' there is a single sign for this that may be written as DON'T-LIKE. The BSL verb that means 'I ask you' is a single sign in BSL that is glossed as I-ASK-YOU.
- (3) If a verb sign is repeated, this is glossed to give its meaning, so that a sign that would be translated in English as 'knock on the door for ages', might be glossed KNOCK-FOR-AGES. However, we might also want to show

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that the sign KNOCK was repeatedly made, and this can be shown by the symbol +++, to give KNOCK +++.

- (4) There are other times when an English gloss is not so easy to provide, but the basic meaning of the sign still needs to be written. For example, when a signer points to a particular location, we write 'Index' to show that the signer has pointed to a specified location. If we need to know what grammatical information is included by the pointing, we may add 1, 2, or 3, where 1 would mean 'I' in English, 2 would mean 'you', and 3 would mean 'he', 'she', or 'it'. Index<sub>2</sub> LOVE Index<sub>3</sub> would be another way of writing YOU LOVE HER or, in English 'you love her'.
- (5) If we are writing a fingerspelled word, we write it in small letters, with a '-' in between each letter. To write that someone has fingerspelled the English word 'cat', we would write -c-a-t-. Where letters from one-handed manual alphabets are referred to (e.g. in those from America, Ireland, and France), we write them in small letters, with a '.' between each letter. The two-handed British manual letter corresponding to the written letter 'f' is written -f-, and any manual letter from a one-handed alphabet is written .f.
- (6) A great deal of information in BSL is shown by the face or by head movement. The meaning of this information is not easily translated into English but is often needed in a gloss, especially to give grammatical information. Information given by the face and head is shown by adding a line along the top of the words of the gloss, and writing conventional abbreviations to describe the information. The line extends over the glosses that are accompanied by a particular facial expression or head movement. Conventional abbreviations written along this upper line include:
  - q – this means that the facial expression and head movements are those normally seen during a question in BSL (see chapter 4)
  - neg – this means that the facial expression and head movements are those normally seen during negation in BSL (see chapter 4)
  - t – this means that the facial expression and head movements are those normally seen during the marking of the grammatical topic (see chapters 3 and 4)
  - hn – this refers to a head nod
  - br – this refers to a brow-raise
  - bf – this refers to furrowed brows, often with a frowning expression.

There are times when a sign is difficult to gloss in English because the sign is made up very differently from an English word or phrase. Where the hand-



shape of a verb contains information about what class a noun belongs to (a “classifier”), the gloss includes this information. Thus, if the handshape tells us that an animal is involved in the action, the gloss will be written as animal-CL. If the handshape tells us that a vehicle is involved, the gloss will be written as veh-CL. If it is a person, the gloss is person-CL.

Proforms stand in the place of something previously identified, and include information about an object’s shape. For example, if we want to say ‘I looked at a picture’, we represent the picture with a flat hand, indicating its two-dimensionality, while signing LOOK with the other. The gloss for the picture is written as pro-2D.

Pronouns in BSL are articulated by pointing to a location associated with the noun. The form of the point is the same in all pronouns, but the location of the point varies depending on the location assigned to the noun. Pointing has many other functions in BSL so we use the term ‘index’ to refer to pronoun pointing. This is glossed as Index with a subscript to indicate the location in space. If an Index has the meanings ‘I’, ‘you’, etc., it is glossed as Index<sub>1</sub> or Index<sub>2</sub>. Otherwise Indexes have subscripts ‘<sub>L</sub>’ and ‘<sub>R</sub>’ to indicate left or right sides of signing space; or ‘<sub>A</sub>’, ‘<sub>B</sub>’, etc.

## DESCRIPTION OF HANDSHAPES

Glossing is very useful for discussion of sign linguistics, but it has one major drawback: it only tells us the meaning of the sign, not about its form. On many occasions in this book, we will need to describe the form of the sign, as well as its meaning.

To describe a sign completely, we need to say what handshape was used, what location the sign was made at, exactly how the hands moved, what the orientation of the hands was, and what facial expression and other movements of the head and body were made. This can be quite a lengthy description, but there is a very quick way of noting the handshape of a sign. Often in this book we will use a description of the handshape in conjunction with a gloss, but we will not always specify the other parts of the sign, if this information is not required in the discussion.

There are many ways of representing sign handshapes on paper. They may be drawn, or allocated a symbol. In this book we will use symbols. Readers new to this system may need some time to get used to the conventions, but it is a very simple system, once the basic rules are understood, and it allows very quick and easy description of handshapes.

Single letter labels are assigned to different handshapes to describe them. Many of the label names come from the American manual alphabet (which is different from the British manual alphabet, and uses only one hand). When

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a sign's handshape is the same as a letter in the American manual alphabet, we give it that letter name. For example, a closed fist is similar to the American manual letter 'A', so instead of writing 'fist', we can say 'A' hand. The flat hand with all the fingers together is similar to the American letter 'B', so we label this a 'B' hand. Sometimes, a numeral is used instead, so that an open hand with all the fingers spread out is called a '5' hand because it is the same as the American numeral 5. Some of the handshape names use additional symbols to describe a handshape fully. Most commonly, we might need to say a handshape is 'bent' or 'clawed'.

The following symbols will be used in this book: A, Å, Â, B, B̂, C, E, F, G, H, I, K, L, O, Ô, bO, R, V, V̂, Y, 4, 5, Š, 8. You may want to refer to the illustrations here as you read the book until you become more familiar with the system.



A Fist



Å Fist with thumb extended



Â Fist with 'hat'



B Flat hand, fingers extended and together



B Curved hand, thumb at side



C 'C' shaped hand



E Fist with thumb alongside fingertips



F Thumb and index finger form circle, other fingers straight



G Index finger extended from fist



H Index and middle fingers extended together

*xvi Conventions used***I** Little finger extended from fist**K****L** Index and thumb extended at right angles**O** Circle with thumb and fingertips touching**bO** 'X' with index finger and thumb touching to form 'baby O'**R** Fist with index and middle fingers extended and crossed



V Fist with index and middle fingers extended and spread



V̈ 'V' hand with index and middle fingers bent



4 All fingers except thumb extended and spread



5 All fingers extended and spread



5̈ All fingers extended, spread and loosely curved



8 Index, ring and little fingers extended and spread, thumb and middle finger form circle

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## DOMINANT AND NON-DOMINANT HANDS

Many signs in BSL are made only using one hand. However, there are also signs made using two hands. When we describe a sign, we will also want to describe the actions of the two hands. Reference to the two hands is complicated by the fact that left-handed and right-handed signers will use opposite hands for the same sign. For this reason, we will not refer to 'left' and 'right' hands. Instead, we will refer to the 'dominant(d)' and 'non-dominant(nd)' hands. For the right-handed signer, the dominant hand is the right hand. This is the signer's stronger, more easily controlled hand and if a sign is one handed, the dominant hand will usually be used to articulate the sign. The non-dominant hand is the weaker, less easily manipulated hand. In many uses of two-handed signs, the dominant hand will move, while the non-dominant hand remains stationary.

## ACCEPTABILITY

On some occasions we will describe a sign construction that is linguistically unacceptable or ungrammatical in BSL. When such a construction is glossed, it will have a '★' in front, to show this.

There are also times in this book when it is necessary to refer to socially unacceptable language. When a sign is described that is socially unacceptable, it will have a 'X' in front to show that many signers consider it socially unacceptable.

## OTHER CONVENTIONS

When we refer to a sign gloss, we will use capital letters. When we refer to an English word or phrase, we will use italics. When we refer to an idea that may be expressed in any language, we will use ' ' around the words.

Where it is necessary to refer to the sounds of a spoken language, we will use / / around the letters to show that they represent the phonemes of a language. Where we use [ ], we refer to the physical sounds (see chapter 6).

## ILLUSTRATIONS

The photographs in the book have been taken from video recordings. We have tried to select video frames which contain the most important features of the example. However, since still images cannot show movement, symbols for movement have been added where necessary. These symbols are the same as those used in the *BSL/English Dictionary*.

Arrows and lines show direction and path of movement. The arrowhead indicates the main direction of movement.

### Direction symbols

Open arrowheads indicate movement towards or away from the signer; closed arrowheads indicate movement to the left or right; or up or down. Double arrowheads indicate repeated movement in the direction of the arrowhead; pairs of doubled arrowheads indicate repeated movement in two directions: up and down, side to side, or towards and away from the signer.

> *movement towards or away from the signer*

▲ *movement to the left or right or up or down*

>> *repeated movement towards or away from the signer*

▲▲ *repeated movement to the left or right or up or down*

<< >> *repeated movement towards and away from the signer*

▲▲ ▼▼ *repeated movement from side to side or up and down*

### Path symbols

A line is used to indicate path of movement of the hand. When the symbol appears in a curved arrow around the wrist, it indicates a twisting movement. It may also be used to show wrist or finger bending. An interrupted line indicates slow movement; a doubled line, fast movement; a line with a bar at the end indicates firm movement or abrupt ending of the movement.

———— *hand or part of a hand moving in a line*

- - - - *slow movement*

===== *fast movement*

———— | *firm movement*






### Circular movement

Circles indicating movement have direction symbols in line with the path of movement. Each circle shows the movement of one hand, unless both hands move along the same path. The arrowheads indicate whether the movement is single or repeated, and the direction of movement. Arrowhead position indicates whether the hands move in parallel or alternating movement. Circles are also used to indicate signs where the hands maintain contact throughout the movement (see interacting movement symbols below).

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### Internal movement symbols

Several symbols are used to indicate movements of the finger(s). These include 'tapping' movements of the fingers, 'crumbling' movements, and 'wiggling' movements.







-  *tapping movement in which the hand touches another part of the body several times quickly*
-  *crumbling movement in which the pad of the thumb rubs the pads of the fingers*
-  *wiggling movement of the fingers*
-  *opening or closing of part of the hand*
-  *closed hand opening or open hand closing*
- 1 2 3** *movements occurring in sequence*

### Interacting movements

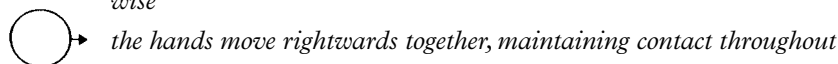
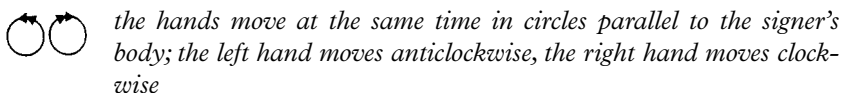
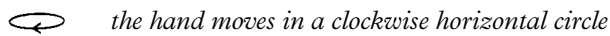
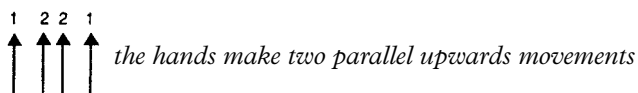
A circle with a cross in it placed over one hand indicates that the hand does not move; a large circle over both hands indicates that the hands maintain contact throughout the movement of the sign. Direction and path symbols attached to a circle indicate that the hands are held together and move together.

- ⊗ *stationary hand – no movement*
- *hands maintain contact throughout the movement*

### Examples of symbols in combination

-  *the hand moves in an arc*
-  *the hand moves slowly downwards*
-  *the hand moves sharply upwards*
-  *the hand moves firmly towards the signer*
-  *the hands move apart while the extended fingers close*
-  *the hand moves away from the signer while opening from a fist*





## EXERCISES

These sections are designed for students of BSL who wish to apply some of the concepts introduced in the book to BSL data. Exercises are found at the end of each chapter. Suggested further reading for each chapter follows each set of exercises.

Where an exercise involves collecting, identifying or analysing samples, students may wish to use the CACDP Sign Linguistics video, which has been specially made to accompany this book, and which provides video material specifically designed to be suitable for the exercises. Alternatively, source material such as the *BSL/English Dictionary*<sup>1</sup>, the BSL CD-ROM<sup>2</sup> series, video recordings of such programmes as *See Hear*, or materials provided by tutors will also be useful. Students will benefit most from the exercises if they discuss their findings with their BSL tutor.

<sup>1</sup> *BSL/English Dictionary*, D. Brien (ed.). Faber & Faber (1993).

<sup>2</sup> BSL CD-ROM. Microbooks (1997).