Sign Language Linguistics
27910/37910
Instructor: Jordan Fenlon (jfenlon@uchicago.edu)
Office hours: Thursdays, 10:45-11:45
Winter quarter: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:00-10:20

The course introduces students to sign languages through the core areas of linguistics (e.g., phonology, morphology, lexicon, syntax, semantics and pragmatics) and with a focus on two sign languages: American Sign Language and British Sign Language. The course will cover a range of theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of sign languages and address questions such as: 'What impact does communication modality have on language?', 'Why is the study of sign language important for understanding linguistic universals?', and 'What is the relationship between sign language and gesture?'. No previous knowledge of sign language is assumed.

Course texts

Overview

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<td>1</td>
<td>Introduction to sign language and the deaf community</td>
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<td>Phonology</td>
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<td>Morphology</td>
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<td>Lexicon</td>
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<td>Sign language documentation (dictionaries and corpora)</td>
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<td>Syntax</td>
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Assessment
1) Classroom participation and attendance (10%)
2) one 1000-word report (worth 30%) on a journal article. Due date: Thurs – Week 5.
3) one 2000-word essay (worth 60%). Due date: Tuesday – Week 11.

Week 1: Introduction and history of sign language research
Topics covered: History of deaf community; different types of sign language communities (micro/macro); Introduction to deaf culture (UK/US); issue of counting the world’s sign languages; issue of counting the number of signers; sign language and endangerment; history of sign language research
Tuesday’s readings

Thursday’s readings

Suggested further reading (*Recommended, ^if you have time)

Week 2: Sign language phonology
Topics covered: Sign language parameters; overview of different phonological models; comparing spoken and signed languages; constraints on sign language structure; sign language syllable; phonological processes; crosslinguistic comparison of phonological variation

Tuesday’s readings

Thursday’s readings

Suggested further reading (*Recommended, ^if you have time)

Week 3: Sign language morphology
Topics covered: overview of different types of morphological processes; simultaneity and sequentiality; inflection vs. derivational morphology; compounding; sign
language pronouns; different types of verbs in sign languages; factors underlying directional modification of verbs.

Tuesday’s reading

Thursday’s reading

Suggested further reading (*Recommended, ^if you have time)

Week 4: The sign language lexicon
Topics covered: Different types of signs; frequency of sign types; different models of the sign language lexicon; characteristics of each component of the lexicon – how do they differ; overview of fingerspelling in BSL and ASL; classifiers in spoken and signed languages

Tuesday’s reading

Thursday’s reading

Suggested further reading (*Recommended, ^if you have time)


**Week 5: Sign language dictionaries**
Topics covered: different types of dictionaries, representing signs in print; lemmatisation; online dictionaries; lexical databases; sign language

This week’s readings


Suggested further readings (*Recommended, ^if you have time)

**Week 6: Syntax**
Topics covered: Sentence types; clausal structure, topic and focus, interrogatives, negation, non-manual markings, prosody

**Tuesday’s readings**

**Thursday’s readings**

Suggested further reading (*Recommended, ^if you have time)
Speech, 42(2-3), 143-176.


**Week 7: Semantics, pragmatics and discourse**
Topics covered: iconicity; metaphor; pragmatics of conversation and interaction; genre, style, register; politeness; turn-taking; constructed action

**Tuesday’s reading**

**Thursday’s readings**

**Suggested further reading (Recommended, *if you have time)**


**Week 8: Language contact and bilingualism**
Topics: Mouthings; fingerspelling; code switching; code blending; international sign; pidgins & creoles; language endangerment;

**Tuesday’s reading**

**Thursday’s reading**
TBA

**Suggested further readings (Recommended, *if you have time)**


**Week 9: Sociolinguistics and language change**
Topics: lexical, morpho-syntax, syntactic variation; language change; grammaticalisation; sociolinguistic typology

**Tuesday’s reading**

**Thursday’s reading**

**Suggested further reading (**Recommended, ^if you have time)**


**Week 10: Issues in sign language and linguistics**
Topics: Formalist vs. functionalist approaches to language; data collection; sign language corpora; linguistic theories and sign language; multimodal approach to language; pointing

**Tuesday’s reading**
Suggested further reading (*Recommended, ^if you have time)

