



A History of



Introduction

When we speak, our body language usually helps us to convey our message better: we put our thumbs up to say "OK," shrug to indicate that we don't know, smile when we're happy or frown when we are angry. However, for people with hearing or speech problems, the main way to get through to others is by using a complex set of manual, facial and body movements. This form of communication is called sign language.



Man



You



Tipi

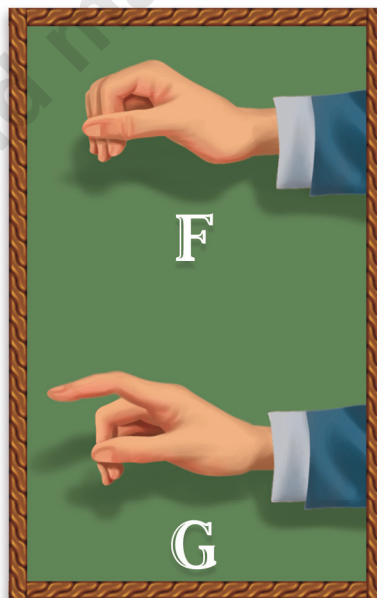
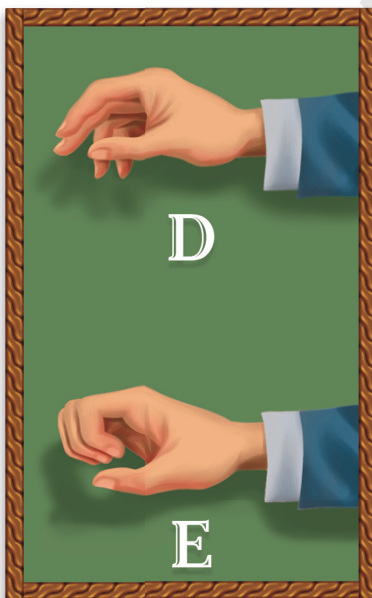
People have been using different variations of sign language for hundreds of years, and each type has its own grammatical rules and structures. But who were the first people to use it? The history of sign language is long and complicated, but we know that Native Americans used hand gestures to communicate with other tribes. Some people believe that this started thousands of years ago.

The 16th to 18th Centuries

In Europe, a kind of sign language was used in monasteries. For centuries, monks had used signs to send messages to each other during their daily periods of silence. In the sixteenth century, a Spanish Benedictine monk called Pedro Ponce de León adapted these gestures to create a way for the deaf to communicate.



Later, the Spanish priest Juan Pablo Bonet built on Ponce de Leon's work. In 1620, Bonet published a method to teach the deaf to speak. It was a system where the right hand was used to make shapes that represented each letter, just as in the sign language alphabets that are used today, but it lacked signs to communicate many other concepts. It wasn't until 1755 that the French priest Charles-Michel de l'Épée created a more detailed method.



French Sign Language...

Hoping to provide deaf people with the education they deserved, Charles-Michel de l'Épée started the first public school for deaf children, the National Institute for Deaf-Mutes in Paris. Students joined the school from all over France and brought different signs with them from home. By observing them, L'Épée was able to adapt the signs they used to communicate among themselves to create a signing method and a dictionary. Eventually, the creation of this clergyman evolved into French Sign Language (FSL), which incorporates a wide range of linguistic elements.



... and Beyond

FSL soon spread across Europe and eventually to the USA, where Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet established the American School for the Deaf in Connecticut in 1817. Once again, students arrived from all over the country with their own ideas, including Native American signs. These were combined to create American Sign Language (ASL).

Today, people with hearing problems around the world are able to get through to each other by using one of many modern signing systems. Each one has different grammar rules, and some even have different accents!



How It Works

As you can see, sign language is extremely useful. But it is also a fun and interactive language to learn! Why don't you try it? The process of communicating through sign language is still called "speaking." That's because people who are signing are basically "talking with their hands." Below you can find the ASL alphabet. Can you sign your name?



Now that you have just learned the letters, what about learning some words? Use these signs to say hello and goodbye to a classmate. Try to spell his or her name as well.

Remember that people often use facial expressions to show others what they mean. Always look at both the face and hands of the "speaker" and don't turn away. You need to pay as much attention as you would in any other conversation.



Technology and Sign Language

During the twenty-first century, technology has been changing the way people communicate, and sign language users have also felt the impact of these changes. For example, in the past few years, researchers have been working on ASL translation devices. These record hand movements and match them to ASL signs in a database. Early devices used to translate single words, but now they have evolved and are able to understand whole sentences.

However, this technology needs improvement. While it can translate full sentences, it still doesn't recognize important facial expressions or body positions. For instance, if someone raises their eyebrows while signing, this may mean that they are changing a statement into a question. Technology developers continue to work on an application that can monitor these types of movements as well as a person's hands.



New Words

Sign language, just like any other language, continues to develop as new ideas or concepts are invented. When a new word is accepted into a spoken and written language, it appears in official dictionaries. In a similar way, signs are created for new words in sign language. Sometimes, however, people fall out about what sign is most appropriate for a word, and it can take some time to come to an agreement!



Conclusion

Hand, face and body movements are an important means of communication for people with hearing and speech problems, and the more than 135 different sign languages that exist around the world are proof of it. However, we all can use gestures to be more expressive, especially when we speak in public. We can also use signs whenever it is not possible to communicate the usual way, such as when we are underwater or at a loud music concert. How often do you use signs to communicate, and what would you do without them?

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