

ASL and Rarefied ASL can be classified as “proper” ASL. However, like all languages, ASL is evolving through usage—and even misuse—by newer members of the Deaf community (Hoffmeister, 1990). It remains to be seen whether Modern ASL becomes the standard way that ASL is used and described in the future.

Interestingly, many invented signs from the Signed English system have crept into ASL and become standardized in the Deaf community (Hoffmeister, 1990; Gamache, 2004). For example, in traditional ASL, there was only one sign representing the concept of group/community. The same sign (similar to the sign for CLASS) was used for family, group, department, team, office, association, league, and society, whereas in Signed English, different signs were contrived for each of these terms by taking the base sign, CLASS, and using the handshape that represents the first letter of these words. In this regard, the handshape “f” is used for FAMILY, the handshape “g” for GROUP, “d” for DEPARTMENT, and so on. This initialization of signs created an expanded vocabulary for the Deaf community and has since become an integral part of ASL. However, initialized signs for words related to STREET (such as street, avenue, road, way, pathway) have not been accepted by the Deaf community. Similarly, initialized signs for meat-related products (ham, pork, beef, etc.) have been completely rejected. The reasons why certain sets of initialized signs are accepted and used widely while others are completely rejected provides an interesting glimpse into the way ASL, just like any language, has naturally evolved over the years. One contributing factor in the use of initialized signs might be the growth of Academic ASL. Consequently, Academic ASL and the use of initialized signs are often used in academic environments, such as graduate schools, and in high-tech environments where there is a need to express specialized vocabulary (Ross & Berkowitz, 2008; Woodward, 1990).

Bilingualism Among Deaf People

As mentioned before, many Deaf people are bilingual because they live and interact among both deaf and hearing people. As briefly discussed in Chapter 5, linguistic fluency among deaf people ranges from being fluent in both ASL and English to being semi-lingual, in which the deaf person

has extremely limited linguistic skills in either language. Dr. Kannapell (1989) identified six linguistic variations among deaf people:

1. *ASL monolinguals*—Deaf people who are competent only in ASL.
2. *ASL dominant bilinguals*—Deaf people who have skills in both ASL and English but are more fluent in ASL.
3. *Balanced bilinguals*—Deaf people who are able to use both languages equally well.
4. *English dominant bilinguals*—Deaf people who are more fluent in English than ASL.
5. *English monolinguals*—Deaf people who have no knowledge of ASL and use English as their primary language.
6. *Semi-linguals*—Deaf people who have limited skills in both ASL and English.

As Americans, it can be assumed that almost all deaf people have some level of English fluency, whereas conversely, not all deaf people know ASL (Burke, 2008). Nevertheless, ASL has repeatedly been cited as a central icon of the Deaf community and the main reason for its existence. Because ASL was developed by Deaf people themselves and has evolved over the years, it is culturally bound to the Deaf community and has the power to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas that are critical to the Deaf existence.

Exactly how ASL is being used among Deaf people is of little concern to the majority of Deaf people. The same holds true for English usage among Americans, except for outspoken critics on both sides who decry the erosion of proper English and ASL. In light of this, the descriptive analysis of language usage among deaf people and English-speaking Americans demonstrates a wide range of linguistic fluency and variation. However, concern for the proper modeling and instruction of the language for both deaf and hearing children remains in the academic arena, and appropriately so. For this reason, prescriptive rules of language must be respected and taught in school; and for deaf children, fluency in both English and ASL should be the goal. To this end, many Deaf leaders advocate the bilingual model as the best solution to achieve this end, based on

the historical success of achieving a high level of fluency in both ASL and English for Deaf children of Deaf parents as well as for Deaf children in bilingual programs.

This philosophy entails a formal and parallel curriculum in both ASL and English for all deaf children throughout their academic career. Just like hearing students who continue to take English classes from kindergarten to high school and even in college, deaf children also need equal exposure and attention to the language that is most accessible to them. Since ASL is attuned to visually oriented people, Deaf students are often able to master the language with ease. With a native-language command of ASL, it is theorized that Deaf children will be able to develop English skills with less difficulty. Some Deaf students will be comfortably bilingual in both ASL and English right from the start and continue to exhibit a strong command of both languages throughout their lives. For others, ASL will develop more quickly because of its visual properties, and, with ASL as a base, these students will eventually master English skills. For some, English will always be a “foreign” language because of the challenges in mastering its nuances. Regardless of the outcome, it is theorized that the century-old challenge of teaching English to deaf children is best addressed through the bilingual approach (see Marschark, 2007, for review; Simms & Thumann, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Whether as a teaching philosophy, a linguistic right, or simply a communication mode, ASL is considered to be the primary cultural marker of the Deaf community. Correspondingly, Deaf people have fought long and hard to ensure that deaf children have access to this historically created and most powerful solution for effective living. American Sign Language, even as it evolves over the years, continues to be the primary focal point of Deaf culture and the unifying element of the Deaf community and will continue to be the most visible marker of Deaf culture for years to come.