

Looking at Sign Language as a Visual and Gestural Shorthand

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In this paper I will compare and contrast sign language (used by the deaf community) and spoken language from the point of view of semiotics and linguistics. Both signed and spoken languages can be defined as: A system of systems -- revolving around the notion of the linguistic sign -- used by human beings to communicate. Both languages also share a common goal: to achieve maximum communication with minimal effort. Where they differ, however, is in the way they produce the meaningful signs to create an efficient system of communication and in the nature of these meaningful signs regarding arbitrariness versus iconicity. Spoken language is based on phonemes that are in opposition to each other which are arbitrary and possess no meaning of their own -- but combine into larger meaningful units such as morphemes, words, etc. Thus spoken language is fundamentally auditory and arbitrary. Sign language is based on units that represent a combination of hand-shapes and gestures which have an orientation and movement to various parts of the body -- all of which not only possess meaning -- but are iconic rather than arbitrary in nature. Thus sign language is fundamentally visual and iconic. Therefore it is our contention that the traditional concepts of spoken language are neither appropriate nor suitable for sign language and a different approach to analyze sign language will be suggested in this paper.