

when was asl recognized as a language

When Was ASL Recognized as a Language? Understanding the Journey of American Sign Language

when was asl recognized as a language is a question that often comes up in discussions about Deaf culture, linguistics, and education. American Sign Language (ASL) is a rich, complex language used by the Deaf community in the United States and parts of Canada. Despite its widespread use, ASL was not always acknowledged as a legitimate language by linguists, educators, or the general public. So, when did ASL gain recognition as a full-fledged language, and what were the key moments that shaped this journey? Let's dive into the history, the milestones, and the significance of ASL's recognition.

The Early History of ASL and Its Perception

Before ASL was recognized as a language, it was often misunderstood or dismissed as merely a collection of gestures or a simplified form of communication. Early Deaf education in America was heavily influenced by oralist methods, which emphasized lip-reading and speaking over sign language. This approach dominated much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, leading to the marginalization of sign languages.

ASL itself evolved from a blend of French Sign Language (introduced by Laurent Clerc, a Deaf teacher from France) and various indigenous sign systems used by Deaf communities in America. Despite this rich linguistic background, ASL was largely invisible in academic and educational settings.

Why Was ASL Not Recognized Initially?

The lack of recognition stemmed from several misconceptions:

- **Misunderstanding of Sign Languages:** Many believed sign languages were just miming or simple gestures without grammar.
- **Oralist Movement Dominance:** The push for Deaf individuals to speak and lip-read sidelined sign language use.
- **Lack of Linguistic Research:** There was little scientific study of sign languages until the mid-20th century.
- **Social Stigma:** Deafness was often viewed through a medical lens, focusing on disability rather than cultural identity.

The Turning Point: When Was ASL Recognized as a Language?

The turning point in the recognition of ASL as a legitimate language came in the 1960s, largely thanks to the groundbreaking work of linguist William Stokoe. In 1960, Stokoe published research that fundamentally changed how ASL was perceived.

William Stokoe's Landmark Research

William Stokoe was a professor at Gallaudet University, the premier institution for Deaf education in the United States. He approached ASL not as a mere collection of signs but as a structured language with its own phonology, morphology, and syntax.

In 1960, Stokoe published "Sign Language Structure," a study that demonstrated ASL met all the criteria of a natural language. He identified:

- **Phonemes:** The basic units of sign language, which in ASL are handshapes, movements, and locations.
- **Grammar and Syntax:** ASL has its own rules for sentence structure, distinct from English.
- **Morphology:** Signs can be modified in systematic ways to change meaning.

Stokoe's work was revolutionary because it provided scientific evidence that ASL was a language, not a simplified code or a derivative of English.

Impact of Stokoe's Work on ASL Recognition

The linguistic community gradually accepted ASL as a bona fide language following Stokoe's research. This acknowledgment had far-reaching consequences:

- **Educational Reforms:** Deaf education began to incorporate ASL as a medium of instruction.
- **Cultural Validation:** The Deaf community gained greater recognition and pride in their language and culture.
- **Linguistic Studies:** ASL became a subject of academic research, leading to a deeper understanding of sign languages worldwide.

ASL Recognition in Education and Policy

Recognition in linguistic circles was just the beginning. Over the following decades, American Sign Language gained wider acceptance in educational policy, legal frameworks, and society at large.

Legal and Educational Milestones

- **1970s and 1980s:** Several states began to officially recognize ASL in Deaf education programs.
- **1990:** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law, which supported the rights of Deaf individuals, including access to interpreters.
- **2000s:** Many universities started offering ASL courses as part of their language programs, further legitimizing it as a language equivalent to spoken ones.

Current Status of ASL

Today, ASL is recognized as the primary language of many Deaf Americans and is considered a natural, fully developed language. It is taught in schools, used in media, and embraced as a core element of Deaf identity.

Why Recognition of ASL Matters Beyond Linguistics

Understanding when ASL was recognized as a language is important, but it's equally crucial to appreciate why this recognition matters on a broader scale.

Empowering the Deaf Community

Language is deeply tied to culture and identity. Recognizing ASL as a legitimate language validates Deaf culture, promotes self-advocacy, and strengthens community bonds. It challenges the notion of Deafness as a disability and frames it as a unique human experience.

Improving Accessibility and Inclusion

Official recognition has led to better accessibility in education, government services, healthcare, and media. ASL interpreters are more widely available, and Deaf individuals can participate more fully in society.

Enriching Linguistic Diversity

ASL contributes to the global tapestry of human languages. Its recognition has spurred research in sign linguistics, highlighting the diverse ways humans communicate beyond spoken words.

Tips for Learning More About ASL and Its History

If you're curious about ASL and its fascinating journey to recognition, here are some ways to deepen your understanding:

- **Explore Historical Documents:** Read about William Stokoe's research and the oralist movement's impact on Deaf education.
- **Engage with the Deaf Community:** Attend Deaf events or watch ASL performances to experience the language in action.
- **Take ASL Classes:** Learning the language firsthand gives insight into its

structure and cultural significance.

- **Watch Documentaries and Films:** Many productions highlight Deaf history and the evolution of ASL.
- **Follow Advocacy Groups:** Organizations like the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) provide resources and updates on ASL recognition and rights.

Each of these steps enriches your appreciation for ASL's linguistic complexity and cultural richness.

The story of **when was asl recognized as a language** is not just about a date or a single event—it's about a transformative shift in understanding communication, culture, and identity. From its early days of neglect to its current status as a vibrant and respected language, ASL's journey reflects the resilience and pride of the Deaf community and the evolving landscape of language recognition worldwide.

Frequently Asked Questions

When was American Sign Language (ASL) officially recognized as a language?

American Sign Language was officially recognized as a language in 1960, following the research of linguist William Stokoe.

Who was responsible for the recognition of ASL as a language?

Linguist William Stokoe is credited with recognizing ASL as a distinct language in 1960 through his groundbreaking research.

What evidence led to ASL being recognized as a language?

William Stokoe's analysis showed that ASL has its own unique grammar, syntax, and morphology, distinct from English, proving it is a legitimate language.

Why was ASL not recognized as a language before the 1960s?

Before the 1960s, ASL was often viewed as a collection of gestures or a form of English rather than a language due to lack of linguistic research and societal biases.

How did the recognition of ASL impact the Deaf community?

The recognition of ASL validated the cultural identity of the Deaf community,

improved Deaf education, and promoted acceptance of ASL as a natural language.

Is ASL recognized as an official language in the United States?

ASL is not recognized as an official language at the federal level in the United States, but several states have passed laws recognizing it as a language.

When did educational institutions start incorporating ASL as a language?

Following the recognition of ASL as a language in the 1960s, many educational institutions began incorporating ASL into their curricula during the 1970s and 1980s.

What was the significance of William Stokoe's book on ASL?

William Stokoe's 1960 book, 'Sign Language Structure,' was significant because it provided the first linguistic analysis of ASL, establishing it as a true language.

Are there other sign languages recognized as languages like ASL?

Yes, many other sign languages around the world, such as British Sign Language (BSL) and French Sign Language (LSF), have also been recognized as distinct languages.

How has the recognition of ASL evolved over time since 1960?

Since 1960, recognition of ASL has grown globally, leading to increased research, educational programs, interpreter services, and cultural acceptance.

Additional Resources

****The Recognition of American Sign Language as a Legitimate Language: A Historical and Linguistic Review****

when was asl recognized as a language is a question that invites exploration into the complex history of American Sign Language (ASL) and its journey toward official acknowledgment as a fully-fledged language. For many years, ASL was misunderstood, marginalized, or seen merely as a collection of gestures rather than a structured, rule-governed linguistic system. This article investigates the timeline, key figures, and pivotal research that led to the acceptance of ASL as a legitimate language, highlighting its unique linguistic features and the implications of its recognition.

The Early Perceptions and Misconceptions of ASL

Before delving into the specific moment when ASL gained recognition, it is essential to understand the cultural and educational context surrounding sign language in the United States. For much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, deaf communication was largely dismissed by the dominant hearing society. Oralism, the method that emphasized lip-reading and speech, was widely promoted in schools, often at the expense of sign language use.

ASL was frequently perceived as a rudimentary system of signs and gestures, lacking the complexity and grammar of spoken languages. This misconception was fueled by a lack of linguistic research and general societal attitudes that marginalized Deaf communities. Despite this, ASL flourished within Deaf culture and served as the primary mode of communication among Deaf Americans, preserving a rich linguistic heritage.

The Turning Point: When Was ASL Recognized as a Language?

The Landmark Research of William Stokoe

The definitive moment answering the question of when was ASL recognized as a language came in the 1960s thanks to the pioneering work of William Stokoe, a linguist and professor at Gallaudet University. In 1960, Stokoe published his groundbreaking research demonstrating that ASL is a natural language with its own syntax, morphology, and phonology, distinct from English.

Stokoe's analysis dismantled the prevailing myths about sign language by identifying its linguistic parameters. He showed that ASL possesses discrete units of meaning (morphemes), a structured grammar, and the capacity for infinite expression—hallmarks of any natural language. His work culminated in the publication of **Sign Language Structure** in 1965, which is widely regarded as the seminal text that established ASL's linguistic legitimacy.

Official Recognition and Educational Impact

Following Stokoe's research, the recognition of ASL as a language gradually permeated academic, educational, and governmental institutions. The 1970s and 1980s saw an increased acceptance of ASL in Deaf education, with many schools incorporating sign language instruction and acknowledging its value in fostering literacy and cognitive development among Deaf students.

In 1988, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) formally endorsed ASL as a primary language of Deaf Americans, advocating for its use in education and public services. Additionally, landmark legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 helped promote accessibility and recognition of sign languages, including ASL, in public life.

Linguistic Features That Cement ASL's Status

Understanding when ASL was recognized as a language also involves appreciating the linguistic characteristics that differentiate it from other communication systems. Unlike mere pantomime or gestures, ASL features:

- **Distinct Grammar:** ASL follows its own syntactic rules, which differ from English word order. For example, ASL typically uses a topic-comment structure.
- **Phonology:** ASL has parameters such as handshape, location, movement, palm orientation, and facial expressions that create a phonemic system.
- **Morphology:** Signs can be modified to express tense, number, and other grammatical concepts.
- **Non-manual markers:** Facial expressions and body language are integral to meaning, serving functions similar to intonation in spoken language.

These linguistic components demonstrate that ASL is not a simplified system but rather a rich, expressive language capable of conveying abstract and complex ideas.

Comparisons with Other Sign Languages

The recognition of ASL as a language aligns with the global understanding that sign languages are natural languages, each with unique structures. For example, British Sign Language (BSL) and ASL differ significantly despite both countries sharing English as their spoken language. This distinction further underscores ASL's status as an independent linguistic system rather than a derivative of English.

The Ongoing Evolution of ASL Recognition

While the question of when ASL was recognized as a language has a historical answer rooted in the 1960s, the journey toward full societal acceptance continues. Today, ASL is used by hundreds of thousands of people in the United States and Canada, and its inclusion in educational curricula and interpreter services has expanded.

However, challenges remain, including disparities in educational access for Deaf students and limited public awareness. Efforts by advocacy groups, linguists, and educators aim to promote ASL literacy, expand research, and ensure that Deaf individuals receive equitable opportunities.

The Role of Technology and Media

Modern technology has played a significant role in the visibility and recognition of ASL. Video communication platforms, social media, and online

learning resources have made ASL more accessible to both Deaf and hearing populations. Media representation through television shows, films, and public service announcements has also contributed to normalizing ASL as a legitimate language.

Implications of Recognizing ASL as a Language

The formal recognition of ASL carries profound implications beyond academic circles. It validates the cultural identity of Deaf communities, affirming their language as a cornerstone of their heritage. This acknowledgment also influences policy-making, ensuring that services such as interpreting, education, and healthcare accommodate ASL users effectively.

Moreover, recognizing ASL linguistically encourages further research into sign languages and Deaf culture, fostering greater inclusivity and understanding in a multilingual society.

The journey from marginalization to recognition reflects broader themes of linguistic diversity and the rights of minority language speakers. In this light, the historical milestone of ASL's recognition serves as a case study for language preservation and empowerment worldwide.

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