



Notes

INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE AS A COMPLETE LANGUAGE: CONCEPT, CHARACTERISTICS AND COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS ABOUT SIGN LANGUAGE

Sign languages developed wherever there were deaf people, just as spoken languages developed wherever there were hearing people. Research has shown that, like spoken languages, sign languages are also true, complete, alive and active languages. Like spoken languages, sign languages are also not universal. The sign language used by millions of deaf people in India is known as Indian Sign Language (ISL). In this lesson, you will develop an understanding of how Indian Sign Language is a real and complete language like any other spoken or written language. You will also learn about the various building blocks of spoken/written language and signed language. There is also scope for you to get clarity about some common misconceptions about sign language in this lesson.



OUTCOMES

After studying this lesson, learner:

- describes Indian Sign Language as a real and complete language;
- explains the building blocks of spoken/written language and signed language;
- describes common misconceptions about sign language.

1.1 HOW LANGUAGE IS STRUCTURED

Indian Sign Language is a full and complete language that can express concepts as fully and with as much complexity as English, Hindi, or any other spoken or written language. Indian Sign Language fits the definition of a language because it contains all of the elements of a language. Sign languages were first recognised as real and complete human languages in the 1960s, through research done in the USA and the Netherlands. Human language (signed or spoken) has a different structure than animal communication. Two things make human language different:

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- a. Meaning of words and signs
- b. Structure of words and sentences

a. The meaning of words and signs

- i. In human language, words and signs have meaning because all the people of the community use them in the same way. We learn from other people what words and signs mean. There is no other reason why a sign such as EASY means the opposite of DIFFICULT in Indian Sign Language. In other sign languages, expressing the same meaning ‘easy’ looks completely different, for example, in Turkish Sign Language or in British Sign Language.

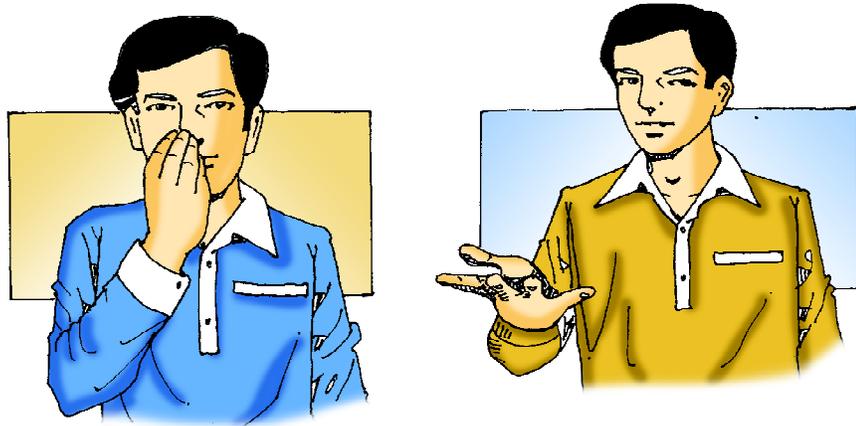


Figure-1.1 : ‘Easy’ in Indian Sign Language



Figure-1.2 : ‘Easy’ in Turkish Sign Language
(touch both sides of the nose)



Figure-1.3 : 'Easy' in British Sign Language (tap on cheek)

- ii. The meanings of signs or words can change over time, and new meanings can be added. Meaning is linked to the culture of each human community. When animals such as dolphins or bees communicate through voice calls or movements, this communication is fixed.
- iii. For some signs, there is a connection between the form of the sign and its meaning. For example, the Indian sign WOMAN refers to a woman's nose ring.



Figure-1.4 : Visual presentation of a woman



Figure-1.5 : 'Woman' in Indian Sign Language



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(Picture source: Meenakshi Jha)

However, people still need to learn the sign. People from other cultures, where women do not wear nose rings, will not recognise any connection between the sign and the meaning. For other signs such as EASY, there's no clear connection between the form and the meaning.

b. The structure of words and sentences

In all human languages, words and sentences are made from smaller elements. The language is put together by assembling elements at different levels. At the smallest level, called **phonology**, we find parts of signs that have no meaning on their own.

For example, WOMAN uses an extended index finger, and makes the sign at the side of the nose. The main parts of signs are the handshape, the movement, and the place where the sign is made.

At the next level, called **morphology**, signs or parts of signs can be combined together. For example, we can closely join the signs WOMAN and MARRY, and together, this means 'wife'. Often you may feel that something is just a single sign, but when we look closely, we find that it is put together from several parts.

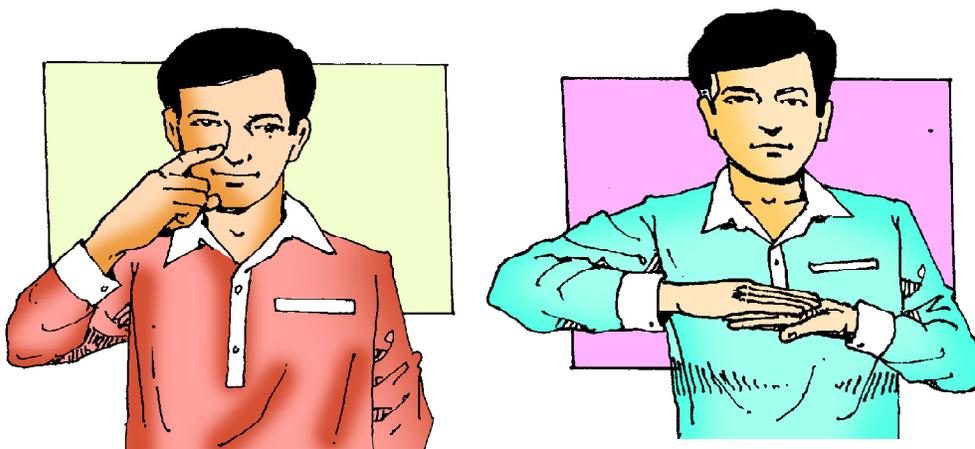


Figure-1.6 : 'Wife' in Indian Sign Language

The most important point about language structure is that we can combine words into longer sentences. This is called **syntax**. When we make sentences, there are rules for how we have to arrange the words or signs.

For example, when signing a question in Indian Sign Language, the general question

sign WHAT has to be placed at the end of the sentence, not at the beginning or in the middle. We can make an unlimited number of sentences because signs can be combined in many different ways to make sentences. Only humans can do this. **Animal communication is limited and does not have rules to create sentences from words.**



INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.1

1. What are the smallest elements of human languages?
2. The smallest level of language is Phonology. Does it apply in sign languages too?
3. At Morphology level, signs or parts of ISL can be combined together. Does it form meaningful words?
4. Which two things make human language different?
5. Sign languages were recognised as real and complete language in which year through research done in USA and Netherland.

1.2 HOW LANGUAGE IS STRUCTURED

Because human language is limitless, we can do for more with it, than any other animal.

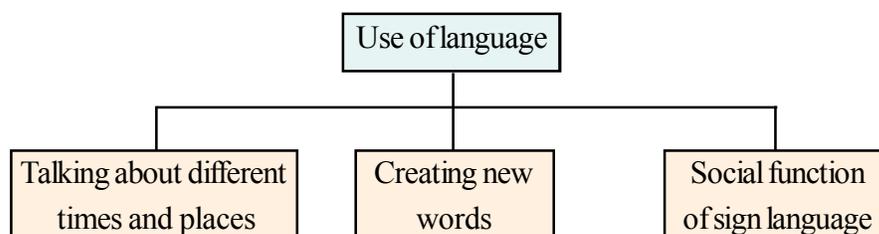


Figure-1.7 : Language Structure

a. Talking about different times and places

We can talk about what we did last week, or make plans for the next 20 years. We can talk about places and objects that are not here at the moment. In fact, we can talk about completely imaginary places and things.

In human language, we can say things like “If you see a snake, you first have to stand still and make no sounds; When the snake has moved away enough, you then run to the house and tell me.” Many animals, for example, birds and monkeys,



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have voice calls to warn each other about dangerous enemies such as snakes. However, this can only be used for the here and now, like calling out “SNAKE!” when the snake is seen nearby. Animals cannot say more complicated things that are beyond the here and now.

b. Creating new words

Languages must have creative expression and the capacity to expand as technology and environments change. Sign languages are no different from spoken languages, and new signs are invented all the time. For example, we have signs for ‘Wi-Fi’, ‘computer’, and ‘WhatsApp’.

These signs were not always a part of Indian Sign Language but have been added as these things became a part of daily life.



Figure-1.8 : Different Signs

c. Social functions of language

You may think that language is mainly considered as a medium through which one person can give information to another person. However, there is so much more that we can do with language:

- ❖ Using language, humans can make promises. Animals cannot make promises.
- ❖ We can tell lies and give misinformation because in human language, you can talk about what is real and what is not real.
- ❖ We can also make jokes, and a person from the same language and culture will usually understand our joke.
- ❖ The aim is not to give information but to manage our relationships with other people.
- ❖ We can use language to talk about the language itself. This is what we have been doing in this lesson. We are using ISL to talk about ISL and other languages. We have signs to talk about ideas such as words, sentences, meanings, and handshakes, and so we can describe what sign languages are.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.2

- 1 How can human languages be used for different purposes?
- 2 Can we talk about different times and places in any language?
- 3 Can we create new words in any language?
- 4 Can we use language for personal and social functions?



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1.3 WRONG BELIEFS ABOUT INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Many people have misconceptions about sign languages. These are misunderstandings, and we need to know clearly what is right and what is wrong.

The most common misconception is that sign languages are not complete languages, that they are similar to the gesturing or miming used by hearing people and have limited ability to express ideas. We have already explained in detail that this is wrong.

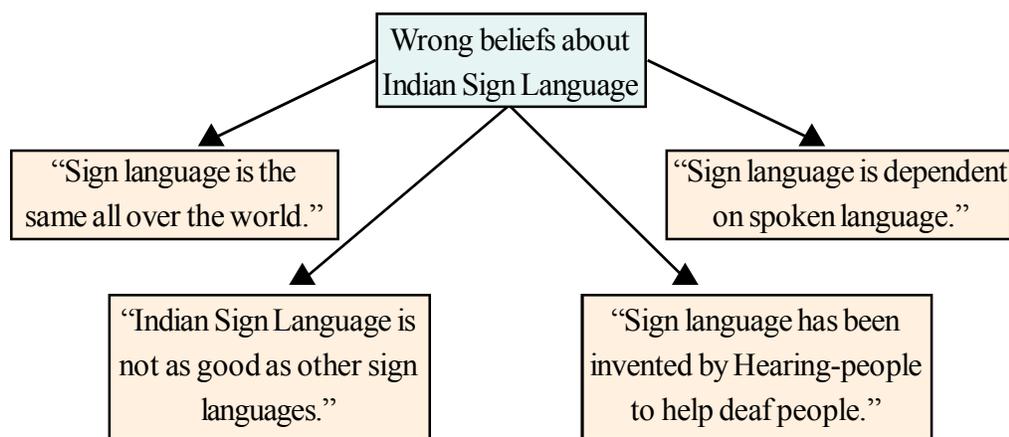


Figure-1.9 : Wrong beliefs about Indian Sign Language

- **Some people believe that “Sign language is the same all over the world.”**

This is wrong!

- ❖ Each country or region has its own sign language, with its own vocabulary and grammar. Deaf people from different countries cannot easily understand each other’s sign language. If a hearing person learns sign language in one country, the person cannot easily understand a sign language from another country, but has to learn the other sign language separately. Even within one country, sign language often varies from region to region.

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- ❖ Some countries have more than one sign language used within their territory. In India, we have Indian Sign Language in most parts of the country, but American sign Language is also being used in Bangalore, and Alipur Sign Language being used in a village with many deaf people in Karnataka. Also, some sign languages are used in more than one country. For example, American Sign Language is used not only in the USA but also in a large part of Canada.

- **Some people believe that “Sign language is dependent on spoken language; it is a representation of the spoken language on the hands.”**

This is wrong!

- ❖ Each sign language in each country or region has its own structure. This structure differs significantly from the structure of the spoken language used in the same country. Sign language is not dependent on spoken language in any way. Indian Sign Language (ISL) is not at all similar to Hindi, to English, or to any other spoken language in India. It has its own structure and is not a hand representation of any spoken language.
- ❖ We do use fingerspelling in ISL but only to quote words from the written language on occasion. Fingerspelling is only a small part of sign language, and it does not mean that ISL is based on another spoken or written language. ISL has its own identity, that is, independent from any other language in India.

- **Some people believe that “Sign language has been invented by hearing people to help deaf people.”**

This is wrong!

- ❖ Sign languages have evolved naturally in all places where deaf people have been gathered. Nobody has invented them for deaf people. Deaf people themselves have created sign languages. (We do not know much about the history of Indian Sign Language because there was no video recording when it started, but we do know that it is the invention of deaf people themselves.)

- Some people believe that “Indian Sign Language is not as good as other sign languages.”

This is wrong!

- ❖ No sign language is superior to another as deaf people can communicate and express themselves in any sign language. Many people, including deaf people, believe that Western sign languages, specially American Sign Language, have more or better grammar and are more developed than Indian Sign Language. This is not correct.
- ❖ As Indian Sign Language expands to new professional contexts, its professional vocabulary also grows. The same process has happened in other sign languages. It is an automatic and natural process, and it does not mean that any sign language is better than another.



INTEXT QUESTIONS 1.3

1. True/False

Wrong beliefs are misconceptions about ISL-

- Each country has its own sign language. (True/False)
- Sign Language is very difficult to learn. (True/False)
- Indian sign language is not good as compared to ASL (True/False)
- Sign language is invented by other people to help deaf. (True/False)
- Sign Language is dependent on spoken language. (True/False)
- Sign Language is same all over the world. (True/False)
- No sign language is better than any other. (True/False)
- We use finger spelling for every communication. (True/ False)
- Sign Language is not dependent on spoken language. (True/False)

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WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- There are two main aspects of a language: How language is structured and how language is used.
- Human languages either signed or spoken are different and much more complex than animal communication.
- In human languages, words or signs can be put together (as per the rules known as the grammar or syntax of that language) to make an infinite number of meaningful sentences. Animal communication is very limited.
- Indian Sign Language fits the definition of a language as it contains all the elements of a language.
- While serving the main role of giving information, using ISL, one can talk about past, present and future people, places and events or even talk about abstract things.
- The vocabulary and syntax of different sign languages are different. How we sign something in ISL may be totally different from how it is signed in Turkish sign language or British sign Language.
- Some signs may have connection with the object they represent (Iconic signs e.g. milk or woman in ISL) and others may not match at all (arbitrary signs, e.g. easy in ISL).
- Like any other spoken language, ISL too has phonology, morphology and syntax components.
- Hand shape, location and movement are the main components of a sign language.
- ISL can be used to talk about time and place, for the creation of new signs and for social functions like to making a promise, telling a joke or lying.
- Among the many wrong beliefs people have about ISL, the major one is that it is not a true or complete language, which is totally wrong. Other wrong beliefs include Sign language is the same all over the world; sign languages are dependent on spoken languages, sign languages are invented by hearing people to help deaf people, and Indian Sign Language is not as good as other sign languages.



TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. Explain Indian Sign Language as a complete entity in its own right, using appropriate examples.
2. How would you describe the components or building blocks of spoken written language and signed language? How are they different or similar? Present your observation.
3. How would you explain the misconceptions about sign language? Justify your position with examples.



ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

1.1

1. Phonology
2. No, as many smallest parts of signs have no meaning on their own.
3. Yes, at Morphology level, signs or parts of ISL can be combined together. It forms meaningful words like Woman + Marry = Wife
4. Two things which make human language different are : 1- Meaning of words and signs ; 2- structure of words and sentences
5. In 1960s, SL was recognised as real and complete in USA and Netherland.

1.2

1. Yes, human languages can be used to talk about different times and places for communication for self and for social functions.
2. Yes, we can talk about different times and places in any language be it sign language or spoken language.
3. Yes, we can create new words in any language.
4. Yes, we can use language for self and social function.

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**Understanding Indian
Sign Language****Notes****1.3****True/False**

- a. Each country has its own sign language. (True)
- b. Sign Language is very difficult to learn. (False)
- c. Indian sign language is not good as compared to ASL. (False)
- d. Sign language is invented by other people to help deaf. (False)
- e. Sign Language is dependent on spoken language. (False)
- f. Sign Language is same all over the world. (False)
- g. No sign language is better than any other. (True)
- h. We use finger spelling for every communication. (False)
- i. Sign Language is not dependent on spoken language. (True)