

Sound Relief: La Jolla's idea for documenting sign language marks 40 years

By Ashley Mackin

It is a common misconception, says La Jolla Valerie Sutton, that American Sign Language (ASL) is a gesture-based literal translation of the English language. "American Sign Language is nothing like English and it is not 'English on your hands,'" she informs. "Sign languages are sophisticated languages with their own syntax, grammar and structure."



La Jolla resident and SignWriting inventor Valerie Sutton shows the sign for 'perspective' next to the SignWriting symbol for that word.

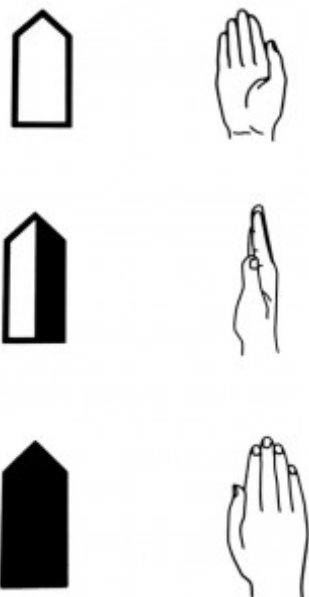
So when it comes to reading (or writing) for the millions around the world who use ASL as their primary language — such as those born deaf or to deaf parents — learning English is really like learning a second language.

"There are all kinds of deaf people with varying levels of ability, but those who never learned written English had been totally cut off from the literature they deserve," she said, noting that sign language was the only language without a form of documentation.

But for the last 40 years, there's been an alternative, a method of reading and writing sign language Sutton

developed and calls “SignWriting,” which has spread and been adapted around the world. Celebrating the 40th anniversary of its development, Sutton hosted the inaugural SignWriting Symposium, online July 21-24, with representatives from 12 countries presenting how SignWriting is being used in their lands.

Get the picture?



Palm placement when signing has a different symbol in SignWriting.

SignWriting uses graphics to depict hand placement and movement, as they would occur when someone is signing. For example, an open hand palm up is portrayed with an outline of a rectangle with a triangulated point, like a post on a picket fence. An open hand palm down has the same shape, but is filled in. If the hand is turned to the side, it is half filled in. An asterisk above a symbol represents signs that involve the hands touching, and arrows indicate the direction hands might move for a certain sign.

UC San Diego adjunct ASL professor Adam Frost, who has been deaf since birth, explained via e-mail, “ASL and English are two very different languages just like English and Spanish are. Sure, there are some things that can be easily translated between the two, but then there are things that are just lost in translation. Any bilingual will tell you that.”

Coming up through the English-based education system, “There were several concepts that I just could not grasp because English is based on sounds, which are not accessible to me,” Frost wrote. “I ended up trying to find connections on my own from what I did understand about languages from ASL.”

For Frost, discovering SignWriting allowed for better documentation of his thoughts. “Since ASL and English are different, it was very difficult to be able to take what I expressed in ASL and write that into English,” he said, noting that he still finds difficulty from time to time. Frost used to video-record his thoughts in ASL in a visual journal and then attempt to translate them into English.

Country by country

Frost and Sutton collaborated with other chairpersons to host the SignWriting Symposium, through which 40 presentations were given, explaining how SignWriting is being adopted for sign languages worldwide.



typing

SignWriting
symbol for
typing

“SignWriting is blowing up in Brazil,” Sutton said. “It is becoming a requirement for teachers who want to teach Brazilian Sign Language to learn SignWriting. At the Symposium, there were 12 presentations from Brazil given by 16 presenters, and half of them use sign language as their native language.”

One of the presentations from Brazil detailed the long process of having a SignWriting dictionary published.

Another by co-chair Nancy Romero of Poway listed the 48 Wikipedia articles now available in SignWriting and her experience translating the entire New Testament of the Bible into SignWriting.

In Tunisia, software is being developed that uses virtual avatars to interpret SignWriting, which creators will call Tunisigner. Other countries represented include Germany, Honduras, Paraguay, Canada, France and Italy.

Hoping to make the digital gathering an annual event, Sutton said presenters have already signed up for the 2015 Symposium.

SignWriting by Sutton

The concept for SignWriting actually started internationally. When Sutton was studying ballet in Denmark in the early 1970s, she developed a way to document body movement to assist with the language barrier, using similar graphics as SignWriting.

After its success, the University of Copenhagen Sign Language Research Lab called her in 1974 to see if she could develop her dance writing system to record the movements of sign language.

When she returned to the United States, she brought SignWriting with her and began working with deaf people here.

Hosting the Symposium and seeing how far it has come since then, she said, was “enough to make you cry, it was just so amazing.”

- In order to continue the online Symposium, Sutton said donations to pay for sign translators and IT support would be helpful. Sutton currently pays for their services herself. Contributions to the 501(c)(3) nonprofit can be made by calling (858) 456-0098 or visiting SignWriting.org/donate

Understanding SignWriting



school

SignWriting
symbol for
'school'

- Arguing that SignWriting is not a new language, but rather a way to write down pre-existing languages, creator Valerie Sutton said the symbols used are similar to the alphabet.

“It’s international in the same way the Roman alphabet is international — the same symbols (letters) are used to spell out words but they are in different languages. With SignWriting, the movements may be similar, but they do not always mean the same thing. It has to be applied to the language you already know,” Sutton said.

In ASL, for example, the sign for “cook” is a flipping motion like one was flipping a hamburger patty or a pancake. In other countries, the sign is a stirring motion, like someone stirring a pot. But because the graphics do not correlate with any one verbal language, they could be adapted to any sign language.

On the Web

- [SignWriting.org](#): Find all of the symposium presentations (with English captions), as well as free instruction material.

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