

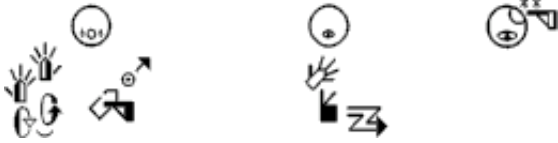
Learn To Read SignWriting (GebaerdenSchrift)
by Stefan Wöhrmann

This article was published in German in the
Das Zeichen Journal, Hamburg, Germany, November, 2003
[Read the complete article in German by clicking here.](#)

Below is an [English translation](#) of the 12-page German article.



[English Translation](#)
Learn To Read SignWriting (GebaerdenSchrift)
by Stefan Wöhrmann



Up until now, Sign Languages were considered languages without written forms. The invention and further development of SignWriting is truly sensational. Finally there is a real way to write all of the signed languages in the world with an easy to understand, practical writing system.

Valerie Sutton (below you can see her sign-name written in SignWriting) is the inventor of SignWriting. The interested reader will find more information about the history of SignWriting and links to SignWriting users on the internet. Just go to the following websites: www.signwriting.org and www.signbank.org.

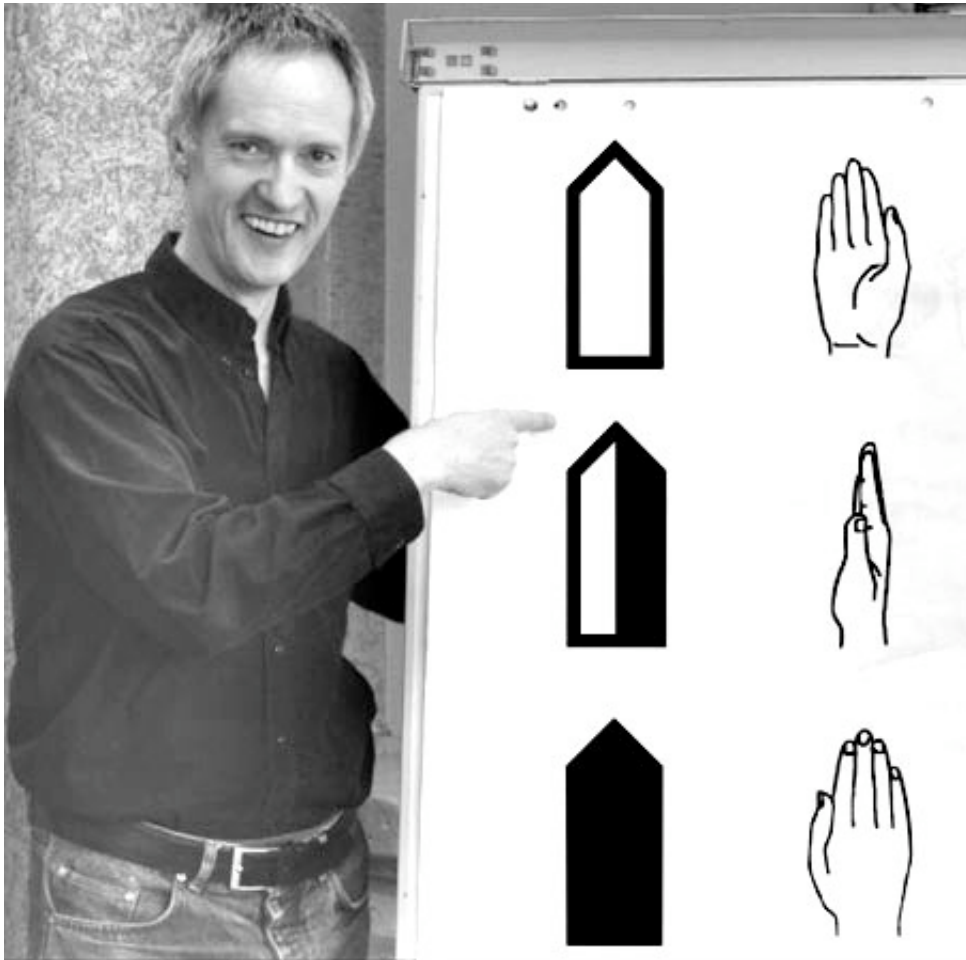


As a young ballet dancer, Valerie Sutton was interested in writing down dance movement, documenting the aspects of space and dynamics in a quick, exact and easy to understand way. She invented a notation system, calling it "Sutton DanceWriting". Later, she became interested in describing all kinds of body movement as well, not just dance. The general system for writing all movement is called "[Sutton Movement Writing & Shorthand](#)."

A special section of Sutton Movement Writing is used for writing the movements of signed languages. This is called "Sutton SignWriting", which became, over the years, a very effective writing system for Sign Languages.



In 2001, I heard about SignWriting for the first time. Since then I put a lot of energy in spreading "GebaerdenSchrift" as it is called in the German speaking area. In the beginning, I focused my energy on learning to read GebaerdenSchrift. Thanks to a very intense exchange via phone and the internet with [Valerie Sutton](#), I qualified to become a specialist in this field. I am very motivated to support the further development and the spreading of GebaerdenSchrift. Therefore I offer presentations, lectures and workshops about it.



Above: Stefan Woehrmann explains palm facing in SignWriting.

I have compiled an extensive dictionary of written signs, with more than 9000 entries, using the special SignWriter DOS Computer Program, which is available for free on the internet. Because of my many written GebaerdenSchrift-documents, other interested beginners have a better chance to develop skills faster, allowing them to write documents on their own. You can view these documents if you visit my web site on the internet: www.gebaerdenschrift.de

Gebaerdenschrift Changes Teaching Methods At School ---

In literature written about deaf education, you will find numerous comments about how Deaf students have poor literacy levels in oral languages, even if the students have gone to school for many years, and that Deaf children are not able to learn the German spoken language used by hearing people. Therefore, Deaf children have little chance to compare their knowledge about what is being said, with why the comment was made, with what they see in a given situation. The bigger problem is that very few deaf children are familiar with any Sign Language in their early childhood. This circumstance can lead to negative results. Without any strong language as a basis, they are asked to learn a "first language" which they cannot hear, but which is, on the other hand, the basis of all communicative exchange in their environment. Without strong competence in spoken German, there is no chance of being successful in school.

The result is, that in general, deaf pupils are way behind their hearing peers, when it comes to skills and knowledge in school. Even the medical invention and development of the Cochlear-Implant (CI) will not change this fact for the majority of these deaf children. Deaf children at young ages are often unable to describe their own feelings or to reflect the behavior of other people in an adequate manner. This may cause additional risks for the social-emotional development of deaf children.

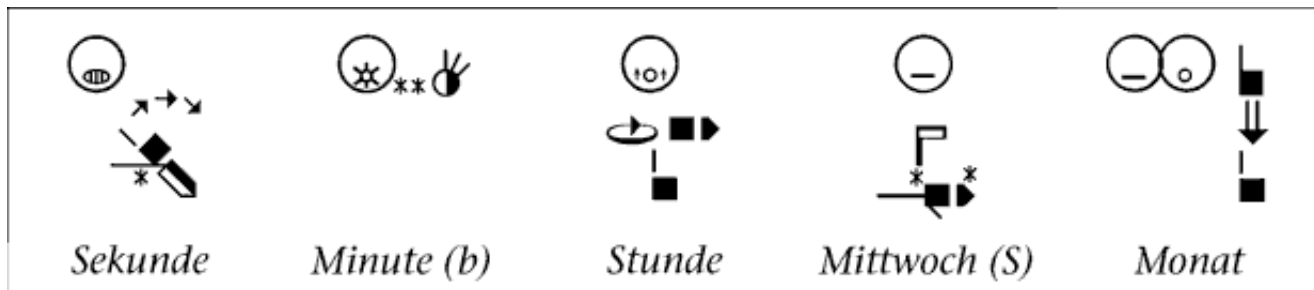
These deaf children do not only lack competence in a spoken language that would allow them to talk about conflicts or to understand contents in schoolbooks that are written for their peer group, but their knowledge about the world, their general education, and their ability to have a dialog are so reduced, that a vicious cycle develops: namely that the required simplification of language used with deaf children does not permit truly substantial progress regarding general knowledge, and competence in a spoken language is not achieved. They have trouble identifying with other role models

and reflecting on the consequences of their own behavior.

Searching for a way out of this dilemma, bilingual education concepts are finally receiving more attention in Germany. Deaf children achieve a substantial Sign Language competence within a few months, if the outside basic conditions are set in place thereafter: Important is a setting where deaf children are playing and learning together with support by pedagogical staff members who are fluent in Sign Language.

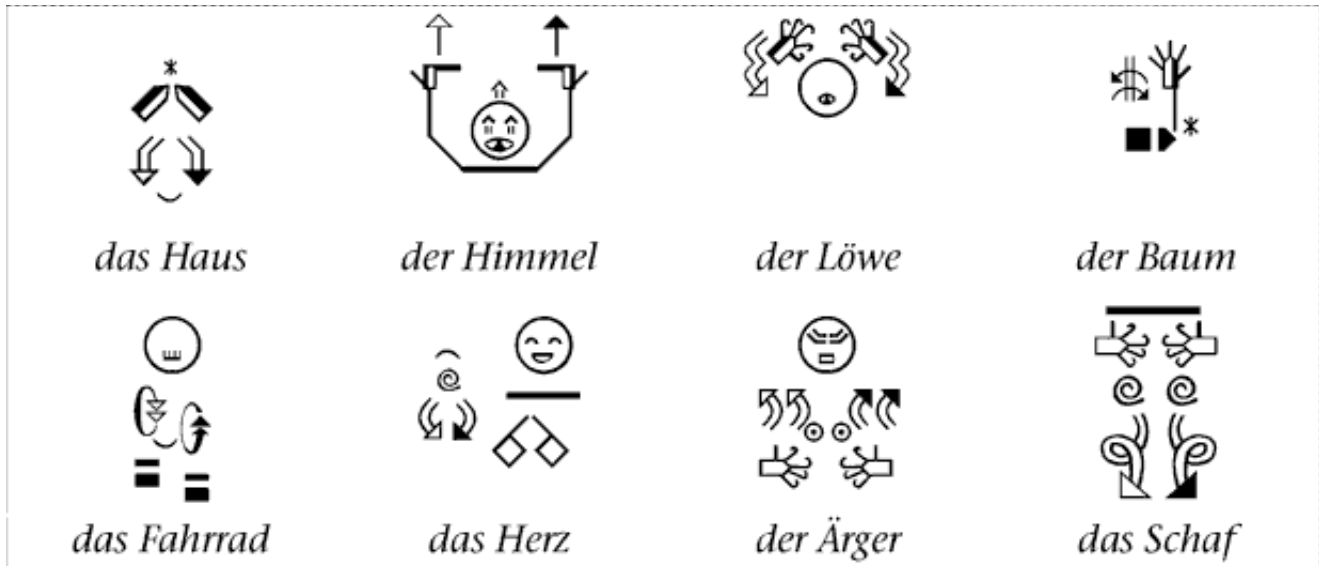
The acquisition of Sign Language competence can only be the first step. There is a fundamental problem that has to be solved. Deaf children do not have a chance to compare the terms of the unknown target language (foreign language = German) in systematic alignment with the terms of their strong communication system (Sign Language), if they are not provided with adequate written materials and documents.

Until now, deaf children belonged to the few linguistic minorities which could not receive books written in their everyday language – which is Sign Language – in order to find a guided way into the target language – in our case it is German.



Now we can change this dramatically! We can write documents in SignWriting and can provide deaf children with training materials which facilitate the acquisition of the German spoken Language, providing substantial vocabulary and grammar. If we are signing to a deaf child, sign language performance can be fast and therefore hard to understand. There are several parameters that are critical for meaning. The deaf child has to perceive and understand all these parameters pretty well, in order to incorporate this sign, with this given performance, into his active vocabulary. It is hard to connect a German word to a specific sign within a signed phrase. Many signs are difficult to remember, if a person does not have a chance to have a closer look at the different parameters in detail.

SignWriting offers the possibility to describe all the important parameters of a sign sufficiently and accurately, without making excessive demands on the reader (with too much detailed analysis – or memory requirements). In fact, many beginners who start to learn SignWriting perceive many signs that are written in SignWriting (the term “sign” in signed languages corresponds to the term “word” in spoken languages) in the beginning, like a pictogram. They understand the meaning, without even knowing anything about the spelling rules and principles that have to be learned and understood by the SignWriting scribe. This explains why even very young children at the age of three years and children who have substantial difficulties in school with other literacy-programs for spoken languages, do not have trouble reading SignWriting documents fluently, achieving a feeling of success from a very short training period.



Learning to write SignWriting is different than learning to read SignWriting, however. The writer must learn an internationally-accepted set of SignWriting symbols and SignSpelling rules. The steps of becoming a skilled SignWriting scribe can be compared with how we learn to write an oral language. The writer overcomes an initial phase in which he finds himself confronted with lots of spelling mistakes. With increasing experience the level of writing competence will rise if he is interested in support and feedback from experienced users.

It is now a goal in this area of special education, to place the deaf child in a position where he can learn new vocabulary from spoken language, in a deeper, more profound way, by connecting these new words to the well-known signs of his everyday communication system. And that is exactly what happens, when we provide bilingual documents (Sign Language and Spoken Language).

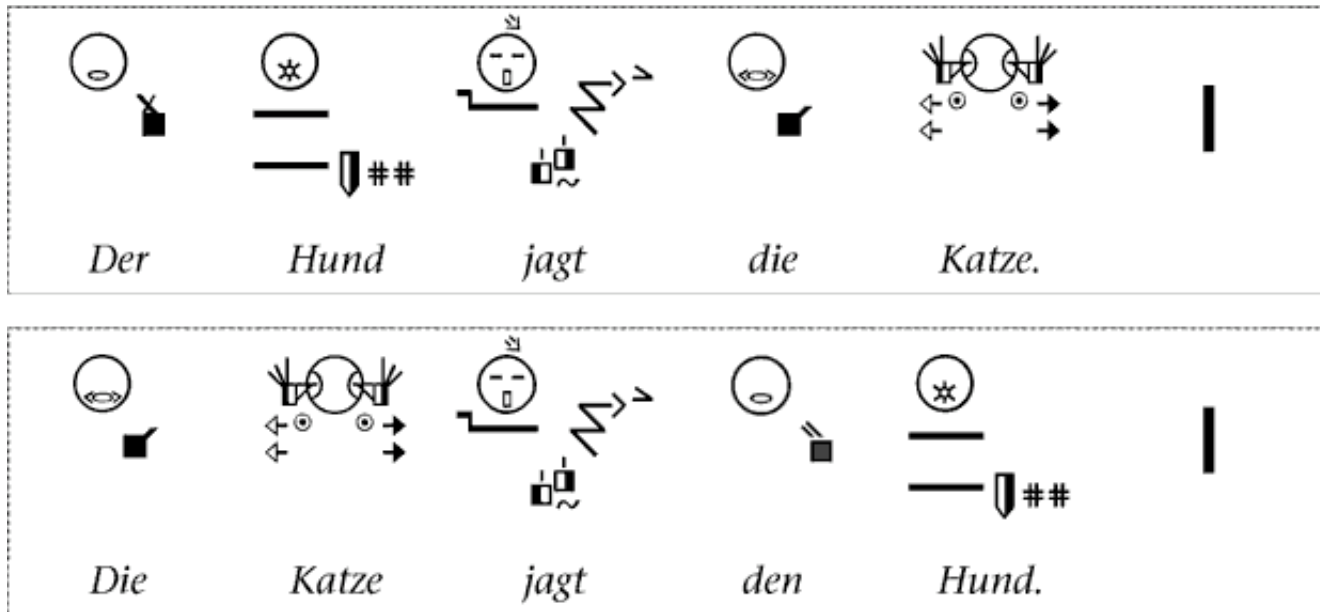
The SignWriting documents can be compared to the German written documents. Comparing the expressed ideas written in two different languages and two different writing systems in a contrastive way is a very powerful support to understanding and acquiring the specific contents of the target language (German).

Students who are asked to transcribe or to translate the SignWriting documents into written German documents are continuously asked to proof-read their own vocabulary and thereby this reinforces their knowledge about the grammar of the target Language.



Contrary to receptive meaningful reading of German written documents, the child is asked, in the case of this translation process, to remember his knowledge of names (glosses), and the use of these single terms within grammatically correct sentences. Knowledge gaps and specific uncertainties in this area are effectively uncovered. Frequently repeating this translation task, the students feel more and more secure and proud. They get the chance to monitor their own level of competency by seeing for themselves, how often they had to refer to the supporting materials that were handed out along with the SignWriting document.

These practical experiences in our School for the Deaf has shown us another very welcome phenomenon. While deaf children need quite a lot of time to learn to read and get a feeling for German written documents, they succeed in learning to read SignWriting documents relatively quickly and pretty much problem-free. Two of my students, even after being taught to read German spoken language for quite a long time, still struggle a great deal, and could not gain a satisfying level of German literacy. But teaching them beforehand to read the easy to understand SignWriting document serves like a pre-training for learning to read German, and later on, they have a deeper understanding of what the German written document really says, because of the SignWriting. I assume that the reason for this is that the SignWriting document gives them general information about what is being said, and that gives them motivation when they are faced with the difficult task to learn to read new German documents.



While deaf signers perform German Sign Language (DGS) you will see a great deal of mouth, tongue and lip movements as if “mouthing” German words (without voice) while signing. Mouthing German words while signing serves as important information about the exact word that is being signed with the hands. Many signs seem to be identified only by the difference in the mouthing of the equivalent word. I do not want to participate in the discussion about the importance and meaning of mouth movements during sign language performance in Germany right now. I just would like to mention, that after watching sign language videos, dialogs between deaf people, and taped television recordings of sign language programs, I came to the conclusion that there is simply no question that German signers exhibit a high ratio of mouth movements while signing.

So I realized that my written SignWriting documents could only be read fast and precisely, if I took the time and attention to write these mouth movements as a part of the different signs within my document.

This information led to another important discovery. My deaf students started to accept the written SignWriting symbols for mouth movements as “special information” about the meaning of signs. Their attitude changed and they began to pay closer attention to lip-reading while they were communicating in sign language directly with a partner. This is a very welcome result since, as a teacher of deaf children, I am very interested in improving their lip-reading skills, which will help them later on, when communicating with other people who do not know sign language.

Children who start at primary school need special instruction to become aware of their difficult task. They are constantly under pressure to ask themselves whether they are able to understand what the dialog-partner tried to express. This is already a difficult task for many deaf children who “survived” the first few years without any fundamental language system. But they have to understand and to learn much more. Their task will be, during their school years, and hopefully later on, to ask themselves whether they are able to express a given term or idea in both spoken language and sign language. It is not enough to be able to sign the message. In order to improve integration in the business world of the hearing majority in Germany, deaf people are much better off, if they achieve a high level of German spoken language competence.

So these young children at age seven to ten have to understand that there are two different language systems which should not be mixed up.

To understand this concept takes quite a while for these children.

From my own experience, I can tell you, that deaf children of fourth grade level in Germany (11-12 years old) use the SignWriting documents and the SignWriter DOS computer program in an amazingly analytical and competent way, using them as autodidactic language acquisition tools...in other words, SignWriting and SignWriter are being used to strengthen and to extend their German spoken language competence. Interestingly enough, I seldom focus on the benefit of the SignWriting documents on Sign Language development because this seems so obvious and natural. But of course this is true too!

Within this context, it is very helpful to have the level of difficulty in the SignWriting documents be equivalent to the level of the learning in the target language.

Beginners, students with poor levels of language acquisition and otherwise weak learners receive documents which are written in Exact Signed German (LBG) in SignWriting. The single signs – printed in a big size are written with many additional mouth movement symbols. These documents also contain a lot of written fingerspelling in SignWriting, in order to facilitate a translation into spoken German. There are only a few lines on a sheet of paper. The child is asked to write the translation directly beneath the SignWriting sign.

In the beginning, I tried to figure out what the best kind of SignWriting document would be, for helping these deaf children learn to read and write German spoken language. Contrary to my prior assumption, the children, none of whom came from Deaf families, felt quite confused over the fact, that there are two different Sign Language choices in Germany, namely Signed German (LBG) and German Sign Language (DGS). They preferred to work with SignWriting documents written in Signed German (LBG). This way they could read documents written in the movements of signs, but the signs follow the German sentence structure. The children understood the task. The task was to learn vocabulary and grammar in German spoken language. We wrote the German words in the sentence directly underneath the signs written in SignWriting. Having done this again and again, deaf children experienced first insight, and then later the feeling for German sentence structure.

The final goal for deaf children is to reach the highest level of competence possible, namely to be able to translate SignWriting documents that are written in pure German Sign Language (DGS). In these documents, you find only a small portion of the facial expressions used to write the mouthing of words, which I call Mundbilder. Oftentimes there is one Mundbild (mouth symbol) for one sign – and almost no fingerspelling support. In these documents the word-order does not follow the German spoken language, but instead is oriented strictly to the rules of the grammar of German Sign Language.

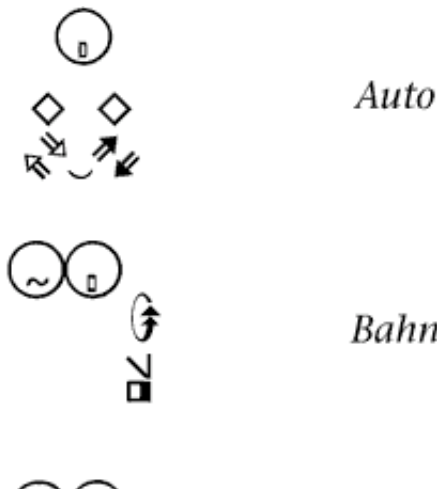
Even the corresponding transmission of idioms and special phrases can now become a subject of learning on the path towards literacy in both language systems. The children are able at this stage to read a written document that is written in DGS simultaneously in spoken German if the sentences are not too complex. They become so skilled at reading both languages, that a spectator would not know if the document in the hand of the deaf child is written in German or SignWriting.

Thus – comparable to other foreign language training courses – there is the chance to create learning materials, lists with vocabulary, exercises for grammar training and special written texts that support the language acquisition process.

The deaf children read, sign, articulate and write the sentences in German.

- 1) Where is the car?
- 2) Where is the airplane?
- 3) Where is the ship?
- 4) Where is the train?

These sentences can be presented now in DGS as soon as the children are able to understand the meaning in the two different options, LBG and DGS. Therefore the teacher has to be skilled in, or at least able to communicate with the students in both Signed German (LBG) and German Sign Language (DGS) as well.





Zug



Fahrrad



Schiff



Dreirad



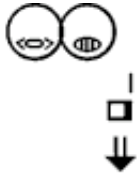
Flugzeug



Kettcar

Vokabelliste: Verkehrsmittel

The translation requirements of the deaf children become more sophisticated over time. Not only do they need to understand the correct word sequence in a sentence, but they also must learn the article of the nouns and their declensions, which we have in the German spoken language. They need to understand the conjugation of verbs. Of course, all this “spoken language information” is not a part of the SignWriting documents that are written in German Sign Language (DGS) because DGS has a completely different grammar structure.



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die

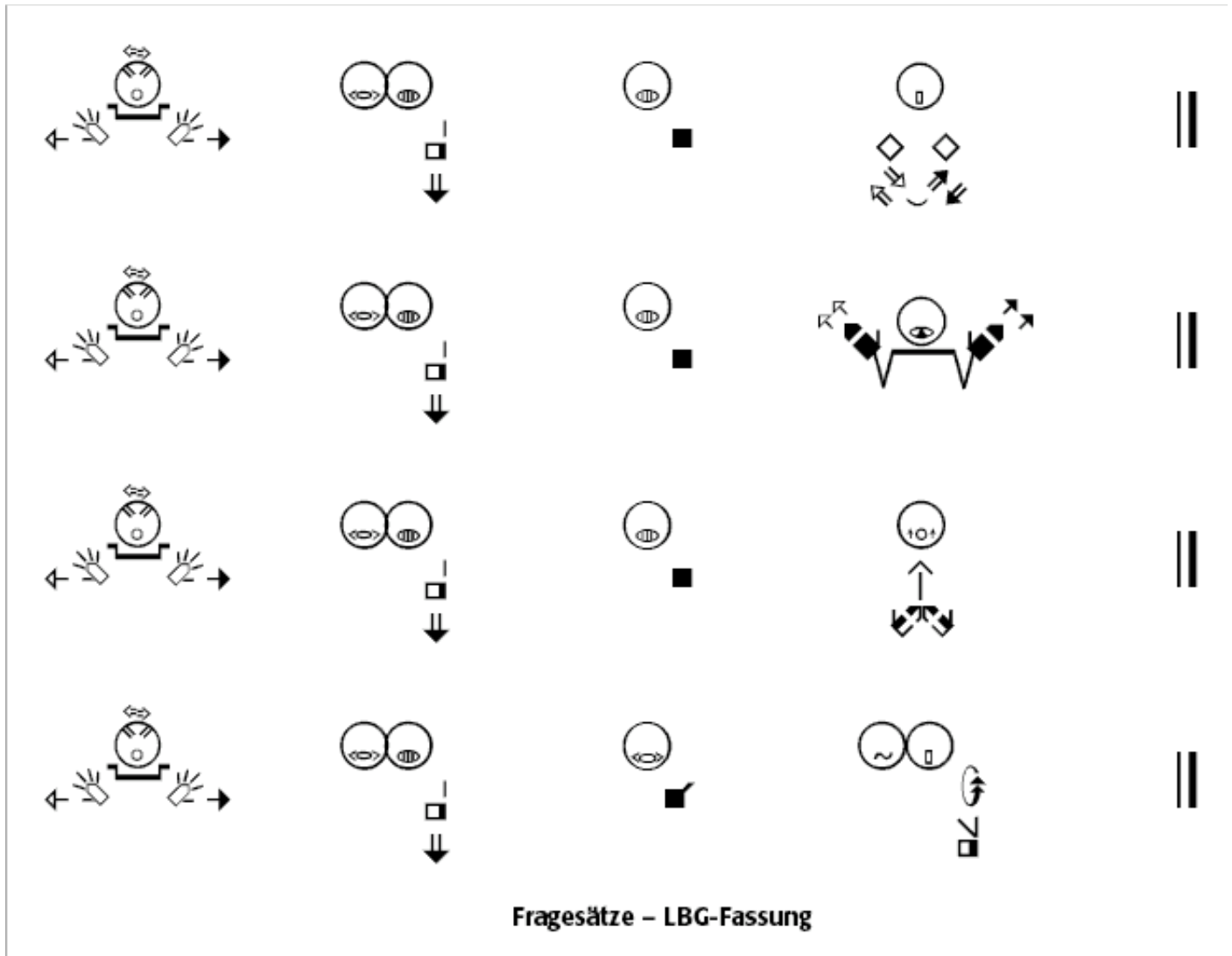


das



Wo ...?

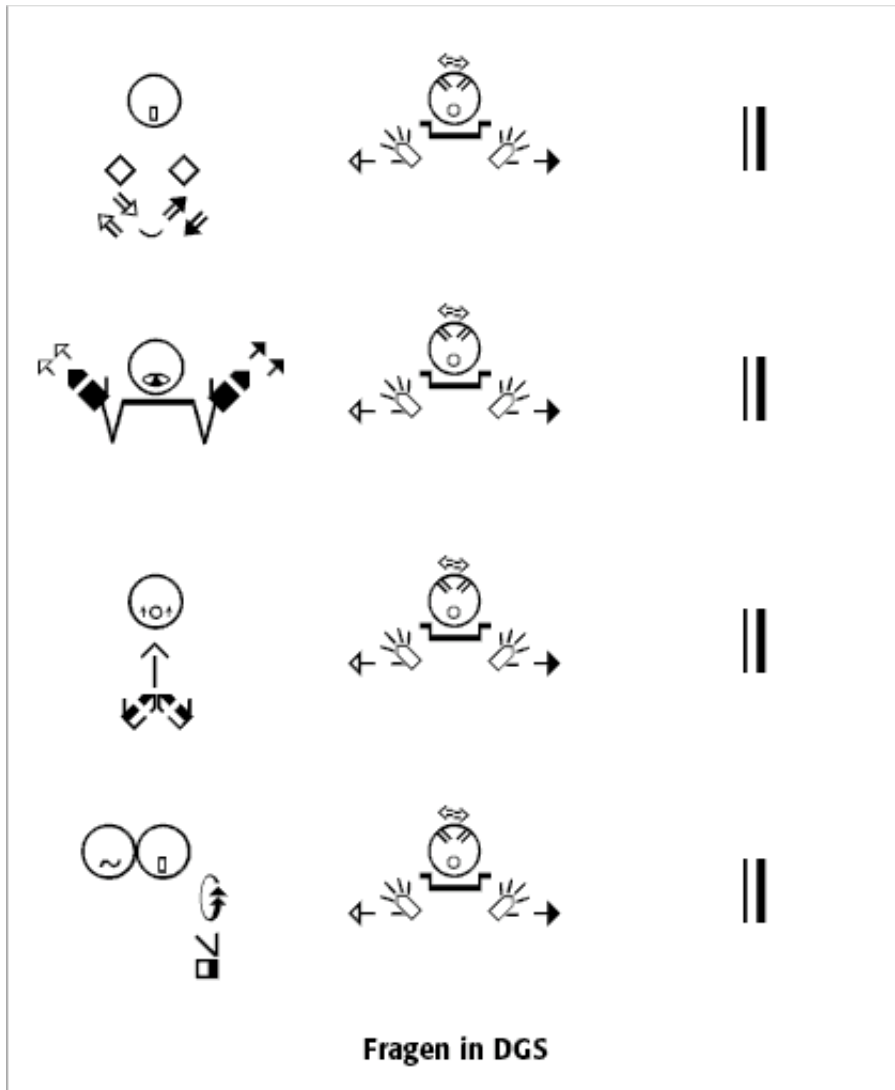
The simple little sentences in the examples presented in this article are only the beginning. As soon as the children are accustomed to the method of learning with these bilingual materials they are well prepared and highly motivated to work on their own with documents that consist of many pages. These documents can be translated stories, songs, poems, prayers, specific phrases that are needed in the classroom, lists of vocabulary, special exercises for grammar or all kinds of dialog role-plays like question and answer exercises.



The fact that the students are able to understand the contents of the SignWriting documents so easily can be used effectively and successfully in order to undertake the adventure of learning a foreign language (German).

The positive aspects of SignWriting however are not limited to the setting of school teaching with deaf pupils. A very important aspect is that native Signers and Sign Language users will now have the chance to document their thoughts or even poetic styles in their original native Language - their Sign Language. Up until now we could not expect to get anything that could be compared to such written documents. People make videos of Sign Language performances, that can be viewed again and again, but only if you own the equipment and have the technical know-how to use the equipment.

In the past, the concept of being able to re-read a signed story or a live-presentation from a Sign Language festival, in a written book, was not even a possibility. Now, however, we can re-read and study in detail most diverse Sign Language performances. Imagine the variety of literature that is possible, from a religious prayer like the "Lord's Prayer" , to a lesson in Sign Language grammar, to a funny joke when two deaf people perform a dialog. The structure of the lecture, the choice of the dialect, determined interpretation forms...all these special aspects can be recorded and read quickly.



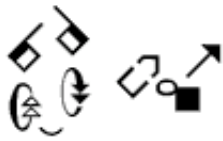
The result is not just pleasure and satisfaction. The study of SignWriting documents offers great opportunities, including assisting in the analysis of videos of Sign Language performances. A video can be viewed a second time with better focus on the details, because of the written SignWriting document. When Signwriters watch a signer perform, it is a different experience than when you write the signs. Later the Signwriter will have to make lots and lots of decisions regarding all the different parameters that will constitute the special aspects of each sign. The chance to be able to open a book in order to re-read a specific Sign Language performance is simply inspiring.

Also regarding international Sign Language comparisons, SignWriting opens new possibilities. The Sign Languages of the world are not the same. Even in Germany, there are many different Sign Language dialects and various differences between signers of different ages, social backgrounds or geographical regions. In addition to that, we believe that some degree of the various versions for some signs are actually the outcome of a “not-too-accurate-reading” and / or performance of these signs.

In Germany, hearing people play a game that is called “Stille Post” (in English in the US, it is called “the game of telephone”). People stand in a line, and one person whispers a word into the ear of their neighbor, and it continues down the line. Each person whispers what they heard the other person say to them. The result is oftentimes funny. The original message – the pronunciation of a word –or even the entire word - has been changed within this row of communicators. It is possible that this happens with the way some signs are produced when people copy each other without paying too much attention to the details of a sign.



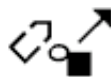
America



SignWriting



computer program



write



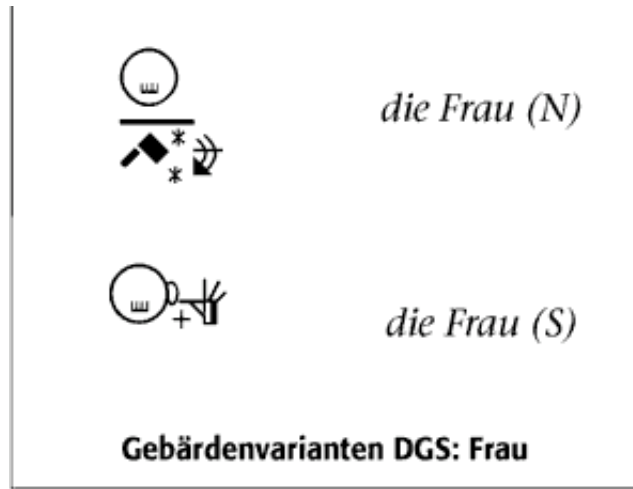
neat



congratulations

ASL-Gebärden

Another reason for the variety of signs may be the influence of hearing teachers. Every day there are so many terms and facts that need an adequate translation in the classroom, and some teachers may create their own "hometalk" signs, if they are not aware of the existing vocabulary in their national Sign Language.



SignWriting offers the chance to store and retrieve all the data that constitutes a given Sign Language performance. Databanks can be setup to record many different sign language variations. Deaf and hearing skilled signers could use independently specified texts, films or pictures, in order to compile solutions for translations of spoken languages into signed languages (DGS or also LBG). These contributions can be videotaped. The videos can be transcribed now into SignWriting. These documents form an outstanding basis for an exact analysis of what Sign Language looks like, or should not look like. In contrast with the video, one can put the written documents next to each other. Going back and forth, pointing to a specific symbol here and there, allows marvelous comparison of the different interpretations:

1. What captures the reader's attention?
2. What is most welcome?
3. What kind of interpretation in Sign Language would be favored?
4. What is rejected after intensive discussion among Signers?
5. Which aspects should receive attention in Sign Language courses?

There are substantial advantages for using SignWriting with hearing users and learners of Sign Language. Sign Language is visually-based and is difficult to learn for phonologically-oriented hearing people. One reason for some frustrations and poor results in Sign Language courses may be due to the fact that the class participants received, in the past, insufficient learning materials, that would provide backup for students at home, reviewing what was learned in class.



The first impression deceives!! The little guy does not look at you! Standing behind the dancer you look from behind through the head and body and hands. This little picture helps to understand the expressive point of view. The dancer looks into his palms. He is lifting the left leg. He is standing both feet on the ground. He is lifting his right leg (from left to the right).

DGS-glossing with a few drawn Sign Language illustrations as single sketches are frequently not enough, in order to provide sufficient learning materials required for training purposes. In addition, glosses are not adequate to even approximately illustrate the beauty and originality of German Sign Language.

In my opinion, glossing is kind of a makeshift way to show the order of signs in German Sign Language, without writing the mime characteristics, like mouth gesturing, brows, or head positions. Glossing does not provide an accurate way to show how the sign was produced or which dialect was chosen.

Documents that are written in SignWriting describe exactly what the movements look like visually. This is very different than long word descriptions of movements, handshapes, and all the other parameters that constitute signs. With SignWriting, the reader can comprehend quickly and, without too much guessing, what the performance of the sign looks like, if the document is well written following the SignSpelling rules ;-).

I would favour a package, which contains both the video of a Sign Language performance and the transcription of the video written in SignWriting.

An important aspect of the benefits of SignWriting could be seen in the production of a set of specialized Sign Language dictionaries for different classes at a School for the Deaf. Finally teachers and pupils could have a common, or at least comprehensive use of terms in Sign Language for the many technical terms and name-signs of important persons, places or historical events. (In Norway there is, for example, a database for physics instruction with approximately 800 specialized technical signs written in SignWriting!)

Our experience shows that it seems very easy to learn to read SignWriting documents. In fact, visitors to our classrooms understand some SignWriting basics within minutes and are able to understand some simple sentences with repeated signs after less than an hour instruction.

Competent Sign Language users are often astonished how quickly and easily they are able to achieve a fairly high level of reading competence after only three days of instruction. They are able to understand the described movement performance with few problems because they are able to compare the imagery of the written document with their knowledge about their own native language for everyday communication.

Thus I would like to refer to an important aspect. Since SignWriting is nothing but a description of movements, reading for deep-meaning pre-supposes that the competent reader can reconstruct the Sign Language performance. The reader or performer will not understand the meaning of his performance unless he knows the Sign Language that has been written down. And in the reverse, you can see that SignWriting offers the exceptionally fantastic possibility of learning foreign Sign Languages, or learning other Sign Language dialects in German-speaking countries. What does SignWriting look like? How to describe the substantial aspects of this notation system?

The Roman alphabet is a set of symbols that are the smallest elements of spoken languages. These symbols - the letters, numbers and punctuation marks - can be arranged in new combinations to form new words, sentences, questions or whole texts. With these letters we can write German, English, French, Spanish, and other languages. But only the knowledge of the respective national language however, allows us to be able to understand what is being expressed.

Although a person who knows the letters of the Roman alphabet can read a Finnish word out loud, that does not mean that he also knows what this word means, if he does not know the Finnish language himself. On the other hand - and this is funny to imagine - an illiterate Finnish person would be able to understand this pronunciation by just listening to the word, because he knows the Finnish spoken language in advance. There are other writing systems, which are built upon small units too, and SignWriting is one of them. The flexible re-arrangement and new combinations of these small symbols or letters, provides endless possibilities.

If you try to write Sign Language, you have to know beforehand, which parameters of a sign are meaningful. Which variations in the performance are still acceptable and will still be the same sign? Which variations lead to different meanings? Comparing this to written spoken language, we know of such spelling variations that are very close to each other too, such as:

Mouse - louse - house;
Ice - egg - rice - one.

For German Sign Language (DGS) such criteria can also be designated, requiring special attention during performance and during the process of writing signs as well. These parameters specify handshape, palm facing, location in space, direction of motion, movement dynamics, mime and gesture, mouth movements, eyegaze and so forth. All must be able to be written accurately and they are in SignWriting.

The fascinating aspect about SignWriting - perhaps this is the true secret of the system's success - may be the very fact that Valerie Sutton herself does not make linguistic judgements when writing movement, and this has been true since the

beginning of her system.

Her intention from the beginning has never been – and this is still true today - to write down the linguistic aspects of Sign Languages. Valerie Sutton is interested in recording general movement. She writes a movement-description of how the sign looks. Think of all the vast varieties of different kinds of movements. It could be a physio-therapeutic manipulation, a sequence of dance steps, a poetic expression or the movements written within a New Year's greeting performed in Sign Language. She still continues to state that it does not even have to be human movements. For example, it could be an elevator, a ferris wheel or a grasshopper, whose observable movements she can record with her Sutton Movement Writing system.

This general independence from linguistic considerations allowed her to develop a purely visually-oriented writing system which can be reconstructed and expressed quickly and easily by the reader.

The written feedback from all over the world corresponds with my own experiences as a teacher and SignWriting instructor: Even very young children are able to remember the meaning of the signs, by reading the visual SignWriting symbols, with very little instruction.

One development that serves as a foundation for the writing system is the epoch-making computer database called "Suttons SignBank". Valerie Sutton put together extensive archives of all the symbols that are needed in her general Movement Writing system, and stored them in a SignBank database, called "[Suttons SymbolBank](#)".

	Zeigefinger
	01 01 001 01 01 01
	Category Group Symbol Variation Fill Rotation

	abgeknickter Zeigefinger
	01 01 002 01 01 01
	Category Group Symbol Variation Fill Rotation

	gekrümmter Zeigefinger
	01 01 003 01 01 01
	Category Group Symbol Variation Fill Rotation

	angewinkelter Zeigefinger
	01 01 004 01 01 01
	Category Group Symbol Variation Fill Rotation

	D-Hand
	01 01 005 01 01 01
	Category Group Symbol Variation Fill Rotation


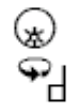
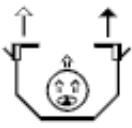
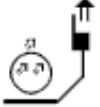

	abgestreckter Zeigefinger
	01 01 006 01 01 03
	Category Group Symbol Variation Fill Rotation

In order to understand this better, think of the symbols in the Movement Writing system as a little like the letters in the Roman alphabet. You may combine as many symbols as you need in different ways, and will get many new movement descriptions or SignSpellings. Some of these will be recognized by some readers as written signs that stem from their familiar Sign Language. They will understand what the sign means, because they know the Sign Language in advance. But others will only understand how to perform the movements, while reading the SignWriting symbols, without having any idea what the movements mean, because the sign they are reading comes from a foreign Sign Language they do not know themselves.

Fällung	01	02	03	04	05	06
01						
02						
03						
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11						
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13						
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16						

Some individual symbols are meaningful signs in their own right (see e.g. number signs).

*SignBank, which is still in the process of development, will allow anybody to search for signs by SignWriting symbols, and by sign parameters, including handshapes, movement symbols, facial expressions and other aspects of signs. It is important to understand that, until now, we did not have software to do that. In the past, we have been fortunate enough to be able to search dictionaries by words in spoken languages and this would find the corresponding sign. This continues to be very useful and is a great help in increasing Sign Language competency.

 <p>Vater</p>	<p>(Doppelschaft-Pfeil schräg) Der Kopf wird schräg nach rechts oben angehoben. (Doppelschaft-Pfeile im Kreis) Die Augen schauen nach rechts oben. Die rechte Flachhand (Handrücken oben) berührt die Stirn und wird dann nach unten zum Kinnkontakt bewegt.</p>
 <p>unser</p>	<p>Mundbild „U“. Die rechte Zeigefingerhand – Finger nach oben, Handfläche zeigt zum Körper – wird kreisförmig gegen den Uhrzeigersinn vor der Brust bewegt.</p>
 <p>Himmel</p>	<p>Der Kopf wird nach oben geneigt. Die Augen schauen nach oben. Mundbild „L“. An den Schultergürtel sind Oberarme und Unterarme angefügt. So ist die Position der abgewinkelten Flachhände über dem Kopf angedeutet. Beide Hände werden über dem Kopf nach vorn bewegt.</p>
 <p>da/im</p>	<p>Der Kopf wird schräg nach rechts oben angehoben. Die Augen schauen nach rechts oben. Die rechte Zeigefingerhand – Handrücken zeigt zum Körper – wird nach oben bewegt.</p>
 <p>Komma</p>	<p>Satzzeichen – vergleichbar mit dem Komma.</p>

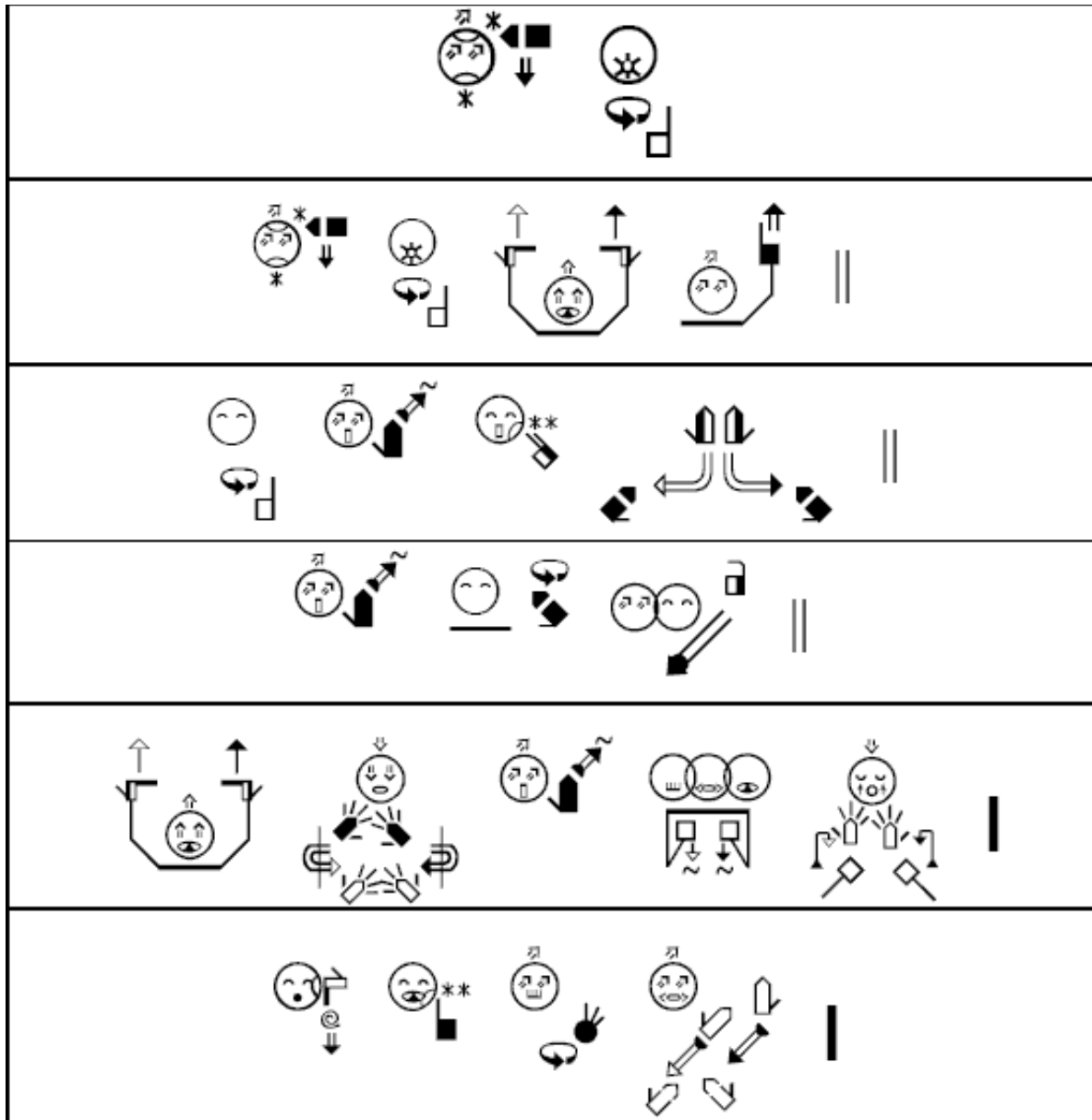
But searching by sign parameters, and searching by every symbol in the Sutton Movement Writing system is absolutely new, and Valerie Sutton is pioneering to provide Sign Language users with different needs, a powerful tool with a wide range of applications.

*Note 2005: This article was written while SignBank was still in development. In 2005 there are three computer programs that can search for signs by SignWriting symbols and sign parameters:

1. SignBank, www.SignBank.org
2. SignPuddle, www.SignBank.org/signpuddle
3. Flemish Online Dictionary Software which is becoming open source in 2005: <http://gebaren.ugent.be>

We have the ability to find a written sign in the dictionary, if we search for the corresponding German word in a list of German words. But with SignBank, as soon as more people create some hundred entries in different dictionaries that represent the individual Sign Languages of the world, we will get the chance to compare any given word or sign, in a variety of different Sign Languages. With a mouse-click you can ask for a list that will show all the entries in the different foreign Sign Languages. It is amazing that within seconds you can compare the sign for "lion" or "deaf" in as many Sign Languages as are already represented in the SignBank database.

To get a better understanding of the category structure used in the SignWriting Symbolbank, look at the table "Suttons SymbolBank".



In each category, Valerie Sutton sub-divides the symbols into different Symbol Groups (see table "Category 1: Handshapes").

Each Symbol Group is yet again divided into other sub-groups: For example, Category 01: Handshapes: Group 01: Index Finger.

Partitioning of each group into sub-groups, based on the categories above, provides each symbol in the Sutton-Symbol-Sequence with an identification (ID) number: Example: Group 01: Handshapes

Each handshape can be viewed at a glance with a chart that displays all of the palm facings and rotations for each symbol, which is very helpful (see table below).

There is a special website on the Internet:

<http://www.movementwriting.org/symbolbank>

in which the different symbols, with all manifestations, are represented.

To give you an idea of the kind of unbelievable personal commitment that has been necessary to achieve this pioneering

effort, I would like to quote a message dated October 21, 2001, written by Valerie Sutton, posted to the members of the SignWriting Email List:

"I categorized and entered thousands of SignWriting symbols into the database. I did this work by propping my elbows on pillows (for less strain on my wrists). I programmed my mouse to use different buttons for repetitive keystrokes. I entered symbols around 8 hours a day ... happily I avoided any wrist problems. To do this data entry, I developed a 'rhythmic flow' while entering the symbols ... almost like a dance ... I had an established routine for entering ... that got faster and faster if I was not interrupted. But if, for example, the telephone rang and I was interrupted briefly, it would take me about a half hour to get back into the rhythmic flow again ... I now know how it feels to do data entry ... not an easy task if done over a long period of time. Antonio Carlos da Rocha Costa blessed me with a gift of 4,000 Gifs! I had already entered around 2,000 of those, but the other 2,000 were an enormous help. Thank you, Antonio Carlos ... what a blessing! The beta test version has around 6,740 symbols, which gives us enough symbols to test different dictionary sorting routines. Later, when SignBank 2.0 is officially released, I hope to have at least 10,000 symbols in SymbolBank."

For most users who are just interested in writing SignWriting documents, the information about the symbol ID numbers and the symbol categorization is not that important. The average SignWriting user has only to learn what kind of symbols are available on the computer based symbolset, and where to find them on the national keyboard of the SignWriter program. Using SignWriter DOS 4.4, with some practice, the desired handshake symbol can be found easily, including the required palm facings, flops and rotations, plus other details.

This then points out, that there is specialized software for typing SignWriting documents, that works efficiently and easily. This computer program, SignWriter DOS 4.4, is available free for download on the web (www.signwriting.org). Instruction documents give an introduction to learning how to use the SignWriter program, which will help you get started. (I know what I am talking about!) I offer workshops for the adult education classes in Osnabrück, Germany, on a regular basis. Participants attend two 24-hour courses which include basic information on learning to read SignWriting, and they also learn how to type with the SignWriter DOS 4.4 computer.

There is not enough space in this article to teach you SignWriting in its entirety! Interested learners are most welcome to access the web for instruction. You can teach yourself the basic rules and principles by visiting the SignWriting web site in Germany, called the GebaerdenSchrift Site: www.gebaerdenschrift.de .

Here you can find not only a variety of SignWriting documents, but dates about upcoming workshops as well.

In order to give you, however, at least a first impression, of how easy it is to understand SignWriting, please look at the following two tables. I transcribed a German Sign Language (DGS) performance of the "Lord's Prayer" in SignWriting. This, obviously, is another field of practical application for SignWriting: Signing choirs in churches or during Sign Language festivals will now have outstanding opportunities. These groups can have the great advantage of written documents for their group presentations!

Good luck and enjoy your first attempt at reading!

(my name-sign : Stefan Wöhrmann)



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