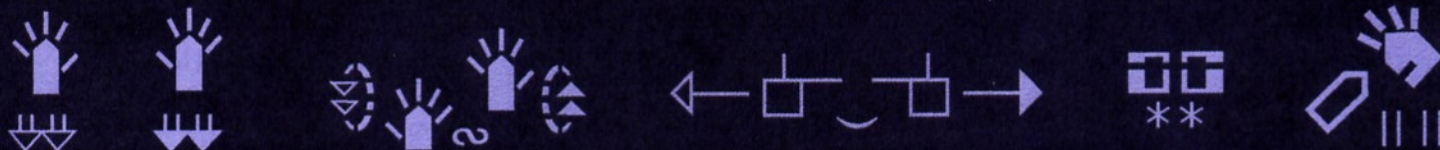


BSL on paper



Imagine reading this magazine in BSL. Impossible, most readers might think. But SignWriting was created to do just that: enable sign language users to read and write in their own language

Previously sign languages were only signed and not written and until recently there were no written records of signed languages. Due to the nature of sign languages in which movement and placement are integral to the grammatical structure it seemed as though a written form of sign language was just not possible.

But now, SignWriting claims to make it possible to have books, newspapers, magazines, dictionaries, and literature written in signs.

SignWriting was first established in 1974 and began being used by American Sign Language users and the Danish Deaf educational system in the early eighties. In the last few years with the spread of the internet and increased PC-ownership, SignWriting has spread across the world.

But hang on, you might be saying, just what is SignWriting? In this article we look at what SignWriting is, how it came about and its potential... and whether it is needed?

Just what is SignWriting?

Basically, SignWriting is a system of visual symbols for hand shapes, body movements and facial expressions. This

allows sign language users to record the hand shape, movement and facial expression of each sign they use in a written form. Using this list of symbols, sign language users can translate their sign language into a written form for the purposes of email, books, poetry and so on. (See page 12 for a guide to how SignWriting works.)

As it is based on a system of generic symbols SignWriting can be used to write any sign language. But as it spreads around the world, it adopts some linguistically based writing conventions specific to particular sign languages. Already, there exist guidelines for writing ASL grammar and it is hoped among SignWriters that with a written form available, sign languages will begin to develop rules for writing grammar within their own sign languages.

The development of SignWriting

The main problem in writing sign languages was that so much grammatical information is held in one's movement – how could this be translated to paper?

This dilemma was not unique to sign languages: those in the world of dance faced the same problem in recording dance routines as written

English just couldn't convey information efficiently. To solve this problem, Valerie Sutton, a dancer from America in the 1960s, decided to create a movement notation system for dance movements in the 1960s. She gave each dance movement a symbol which could then be joined up to convey a routine. It was from this system, DanceWriting, that the idea of SignWriting emerged. Valerie was hired by a group of Sign Language researchers at the University of Copenhagen, to write the movements of Danish Sign Language (DSL) and SignWriting was born in autumn 1974. It was first used to write DSL but as it was a system based on movements, not on linguistics, Valerie says it could be used to record any sign language, not just DSL.

The non-profit organisation Valerie set up in 1974 to develop SignWriting hired Deaf Americans to read and write SignWriting in their native sign language, American Sign Language (ASL). This ensured that native ASL users had a large influence on the development of SignWriting.

The launch of the *SignWriter Newspaper* (which was published between 1981 and 1984) is seen to make the true beginning of writing sign language in America. It was used in the Danish school system between 1982 and 1988 and Norwegian Deaf schools took it up in 1988. Now, SignWriting is used to write signed languages in ►

Guide to how SignWriting works

In SignWriting, each handshape, facial expression and body movement has a symbol. These symbols can be found on www.MovementWriting.org/symbolbank. We asked BSL SignWriter Sandy Fleming to go through the translation of this article's headline into BSL SignWriting and explain what each symbol means

- Fingers are spread out
 - If you don't join the fingers to the hands, this means the hand is lying parallel to the floor (horizontal)
 - The backs of the hands are always black
- BRITISH**
- The thick arrows show downward movements and there are two of them: this means that both hands move down slightly, twice
 - Filled arrowheads are for the left hand, empty arrowheads are for the right hand

- Fingers are spread out
 - Circular arrows: hands move in circles
- SIGN**
- This symbol means that the hands move in a cyclic or alternating fashion

- 'L' hand shape: this is created with your index finger and thumb
 - Arrows pointing in opposite directions: hands move away from each other
- LANGUAGE**

- Box like shapes: hands in fist shape
 - Asterisks: these mean 'contact' - so the fists touch each other twice
- PAPER**

- The left hand is the paper classifier
 - The right hand with four fingers spread moves down three times to indicate the text on the page
- PRINTED-MATERIAL**

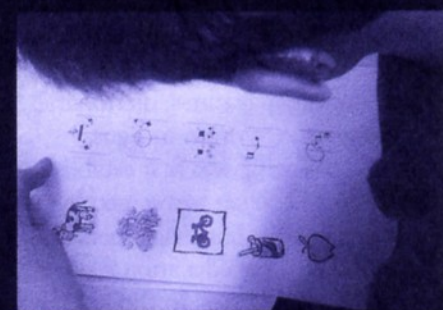
► over 30 countries. While it has spread to countries all around the world it appears to be concentrated around Europe, the US and South America.

Is SignWriting needed?

There are those that feel that SignWriting is not a necessary tool. After all, with videos webcams, the emerging 3G phones, BSL can be recorded and used as a remote communication tool. However, other people argue that the written form is an essential tool in communication. For example, this magazine uses the written form of English to communicate to you, the reader.

But other people argue that sign languages, which are different to the spoken (and written) languages used in their society, ought to have a written form because some people are native to these languages. A written form of English has proved invaluable in British society; why shouldn't there be a written form of BSL for

SignWriting in the cla



All over the world, SignWriting is being introduced into the classroom. We asked some teachers why they are using it...

■ BELGIUM

Kathleen Heylen and Sara Geudens, primary school teachers in a bilingual school in Brussels where Flemish Sign Language and Dutch are taught simultaneously, use the system with their students. It is

the British Sign Language community?

Valerie says that while 'no language has to be written', when it is, 'we all are richer for it'. "Sign languages are beautiful languages and they deserve to be written, preserved and respected". She goes on to explain that SignWriting was not designed to replace any language or writing system. Rather, it was developed to provide a written form for hundreds of languages that did not have any written form before. And some Deaf people and signers benefit from writing their native sign language, which is very different than any spoken language.

The argument for a written form of language is strong. Those languages that had a written form are the ones that have lived throughout history. Latin, a language that is nearly dead in the spoken form, still has a presence through its written form. Reading and writing makes it easier to learn other languages, it

preserves the history and traditions of the culture, and it has a profound influence on the rest of the world. When a language is written, it places it on an equal footing with other written languages, which brings the language attention and respect. Through this process, it is claimed those who use the language learn about their own culture. They see themselves in a new positive light.

Some native sign language users say that learning to read and write their native language is a help to them, and can give them a feeling of pride.

Stuart Thieson from Des Moines, Iowa is someone who uses SignWriting as part of his everyday life. He now teaches it to other Deaf people in his community and says that he is 'glad that SignWriting has been developed because it gives (him) and other Deaf people the freedom to express (themselves) in writing in (their) own sign language'. "Rather than having to limit

ourselves to expressing ourselves in the national spoken language, we now have the flexibility to express ourselves in our sign language and/or in the national spoken language. We have a choice now where we did not have it before." He argues that 'Deaf people are a minority language community in each country and SignWriting is another tool to support (these) communities'

Sandy Fleming from the UK has another argument for SignWriting. "SignWriting is better than video not only for the convenience but for clarity as well. The video records everything whether it's relevant to the meaning or not, while someone using SignWriting only records what they consider relevant to the meaning. For example, learners often miss important facial expressions or mouth movements when watching video because they don't understand what's important in a sign. In SignWriting, only the important

room



called GebarenSchrift in Belgium. Kathleen says one problem they had was that when they taught via Flemish Sign Language, their students had no means of remembering what had been taught and also felt that FSL wasn't a full language because they were able to access Dutch via books. She didn't want to encourage children to write their lessons in Dutch using the

grammar of FSL. For this reason, she and Sara use SignWriting.

■ GERMANY

SignWriting, or GebaerdenSchrift, has taken off in Germany and is being used in education. Stefan Wöhrmann, a teacher in a school for the deaf uses GebaerdenSchrift with his students. He says that students learning any other language have written texts, vocabulary lists and so on to assist their learning. For this reason he has brought GebaerdenSchrift into his curriculum giving his students a tool they can use to write in their language. Since then he says his students have shown 'wonderful progress'. He believes that SignWriting could be used to good effect by students of sign language, saying that often after doing

courses in sign language, people go on to forget the signs and grammar of a sign language – a written form of the language would allow them to keep up their learning and 'develop a feeling for the grammar and variety of sign language'. He adds that Sign Language instructors and teachers who use sign language could prepare their lessons via the language using SignWriting.



Next month sees the first European SignWriting Symposium in Brussels.

The main purpose of the symposium is to give people a chance to get together to gather information, exchange thoughts and experiences concerning SignWriting. The symposium will allow people to share information and experience, discuss software programmes for SignWriting and brainstorming on what other linguistic issues need to be discussed as a group rather than alone.

It is hoped that this will be followed by European SignWriters getting together to promote the system across the continent.

► things are written so the writer's intention is much clearer."

So what of the future in SignWriting?

While it can be used with a pen and paper, the main focus of SignWriting development is via computer-based mediums. One of its main limitations is introducing its symbols and the changes they undergo according to context to computers. While there are still technical issues about getting SignWriting to work with computers, Stuart believes these issues are by no means insurmountable. He explains that while computers were originally designed to work with languages that use the Roman alphabet they are now able to deal with the symbols used by languages such as Hebrew and the writing systems used by languages such as Chinese, where symbols change depending on context. Having been able to deal with these 'challenges', Stuart argues that there is no reason why computers can't deal with

SignWriting. "Now it is SignWriting's turn." It remains to be seen if SignWriting is taken up by the majority of Sign Language users.

Will the advance of video technology make the need for this system redundant? Or will the power of the written word persevere? As long as there is a desire among Sign Language users to write in their native language, the desire for system that enables this will live and SignWriting appears to be such a system.

Where to find out more

■ www.signbank.org

This website contains different tools useful for SignWriting such as a translation facility.

■ www.signwriting.org

Has a link to lessons in SignWriting.

■ <http://bsltext.org/>

A website for SignWriters based in the UK.

Putting SignWriting to practice

Dr Bencie Woll is the Chair of Sign Language & Deaf Studies in the Department of Language and Communication Science at City University London. She used SignWriting in a research project with Lorna Allsop a few years ago. This is what she has to say about it

Lorna Allsop and I were doing a project on International Sign (IS). The existing transcription systems are designed to represent the phonologies of sign languages, but International Sign is not a full language, so it is impossible to make decisions about whether (for example) two handshapes contrast with each other, since there are no people who are native signers of IS. Signwriting was useful because there are no assumptions about the underlying structure of the signing.

I arranged for Lorna Allsop, who was working with me on the International Sign Project, to travel to San Diego to be instructed by Valerie Sutton herself. When Lorna came back, she trained me. I think she spent about a week there. I also made use of the training manual to teach myself.

I have always been interested in the idea of writing sign language for several reasons. It would benefit learners if they could write signs instead of just trying to remember them. Writing is a way for deaf people who don't have access to technology (for example, in the developing world) to be able to record their signing and communicate at a distance with other signers. Being able to read and write a language enhances and changes the way one uses one's language in face-to-face communication.

In order to take off in the UK, I think it would need the support of the Deaf community, teachers and parents of deaf children.





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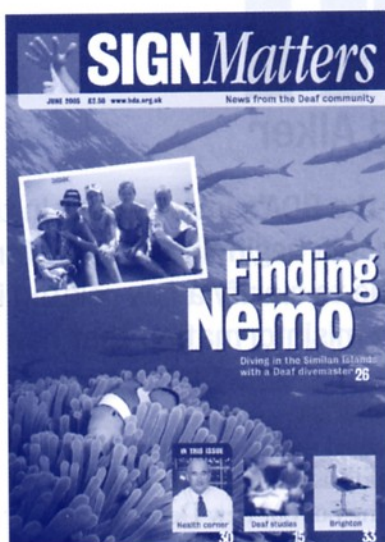
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Summer's here!

If you haven't yet booked your holidays check out Shirley Wilson's article about going on a dive with a divemaster who uses BSL. Her account of the sea, the sun, the food and so on are enough to get even the most unenthusiastic diver booking! (pages 26-29). This month's edition also looks at SignWriting and asks if it is needed (pages 11-14) and interviews a lecturer, a career guidance advisor and some students about Deaf Studies and whether it is a worthwhile course (pages 15-19). Happy Midsummer's Day!

Cathy Heffernan
Editor

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