

Information on Deafness

- According to the National Association of the Deaf, twenty-eight million Americans have some degree of hearing loss (an astonishing 8.6% of the total U.S. population three years and older) and two million of them are deaf, meaning that they cannot hear and understand speech even with the best amplification. Around 300,000 of these two million are *Deaf*, meaning they are users of American Sign Language and feel that they belong to a cultural group, as opposed to those who are *deaf*, those who have a hearing disability.
- American Sign Language (ASL) is the language of a sizeable minority. Estimates range from 500,000 to two million ASL speakers in the U.S. alone (deaf and hearing); there are also many speakers in Canada. Compared to data from the Census Bureau, which counts other language minorities, ASL is the leading minority language in the U.S. after the "big four": Spanish, Italian, German and French.
- Myths about what it means to be Deaf persist everywhere. The facts behind these myths are clarified below. Check your level of awareness...

Myth: Deaf people are mute.

Fact: It is incorrect to assume this. Some may choose not to use their voices if they think they will be difficult to understand or have inappropriate pitch or volume. In any case, terms like "deaf and dumb" or "deaf-mute" are outdated and considered offensive today.

Myth: Unusual sounding speech means the person is mentally retarded.

Fact: Speech development depends greatly on one's ability to hear him or herself talk. For the deaf person, the foundation for learning speech which hearing people take for granted is not there. The situation has nothing to do with intelligence.

Myth: Deaf people can read lips.

Fact: Lip-reading is a skill that some deaf or hard-of-hearing people have; others do not. Even with the best lip-readers, it is important to remember that only about 25% of speech is visible on the lips. Some words look almost exactly the same - for instance, the words "paddle" and "battle."

Myth: Hearing aids completely correct hearing loss.

Fact: Hearing aids are assistive devices which improve hearing for some individuals. Hearing aids do not "correct" hearing. A hearing aid may enable a person to hear someone's voice, even though she or he may not be able to understand distinct words. Just because someone wears a hearing aid does not mean the person hears normally.

Myth: Deaf people are not very bright or educated because they have not learned to talk or do not use proper English grammar.

Fact: The primary language, or first language, of the Deaf Community is American Sign Language; English is a second language. Most deaf and hard-of-hearing people learn English usage and have speech training, but naturally enough they may find it easier to use their primary language most of the time.

Myth: Deaf people lead totally different lives from other people.

Fact: Deaf people are set apart by only one thing. As I. King Jordan, President of Gallaudet University has said, "Deaf people can do anything except hear."

Myth: Sign Languages are universal.

Fact: Fortunately the name American Sign Language implicitly contradicts that, but many Americans imagine that all Deaf people use ASL, and even Deaf Americans sometimes use "ASL" to refer to sign languages in general. (ASL has by far the biggest population of speakers.) **Fact:** ASL is primarily descended from French Sign Language. British Sign Language is quite different. New Zealand Sign Language, Australian Sign Language, and South African Sign Language are daughter languages of BSL. (A distinctive difference from ASL is the two-handed fingerspelling system. Both have advantages: you can fingerspell in ASL while holding a cup of coffee in the other hand, but you can teach and learn the two-handed system much more quickly because so many more of its consonants are iconic, and the vowels are systematic.) There are also distinct Chinese, Japanese, Swedish and many other sign languages: their distribution may or may not correspond with the linguistic divisions of the countries they are in: Belgium has one, Ireland has two, Catholic and Protestant (presumably based on French and British).

Myth: Deaf people *should* all use the same Sign Language.

Fact: Yes, and it would be better if hearing people all *spoke* the same language. Actually of course, since you can't sign on the phone (or on the internet just yet), Deaf people have less use for an international language than hearing people. (There is an artificial international sign language, Gestuno, which is about as popular among Deaf people as Esperanto among the hearing.)

Myth: Sign languages can only refer to concrete things, not abstractions.

Fact: Sign languages have signs for all the abstractions found in spoken languages, and some of their own. Because they are visual, sign languages sometimes have an advantage in dealing with the visual world (to tell a story, one may "build" a scene in "sign-space"), but this does not limit them in any way in dealing with the invisible, any more than audible speech limits hearing people's ability to discuss the silent or the inaudible.

Myth: Sign language isn't really a language. ASL is a gestural version of English.

Fact: Sign languages are true languages, with vocabularies of thousands of words, and grammars as complex and sophisticated as those of any other language, though with fascinating differences from speech. If you think they are merely pantomime, try watching a mathematics lecture, a poetry reading, or a religious service conducted in Sign, and see how much you understand. ASL (American Sign Language) is not an invented system like Esperanto; it developed gradually and naturally among the Deaf. It has no particular relation to English; the best demonstration of this is that it is quite different from British Sign. Curiously enough, it is most closely related to French Sign Language, due to the influence of Laurent Clerc, who came from Paris in 1817 to be the first teacher of the Deaf in the US. ASL is not to be confused with Signed English, which is a word-for-word signed equivalent of English. Deaf people tend to find it tiring, because its grammar, like that of spoken languages, is linear, while that of ASL is primarily spatial.

The following is a comparison between Deaf and Hearing cultures:

American Hearing Population	American Deaf Culture
Identity	
Hearing impaired reference Hearing ability Spoken names Post-lingually / late-deafened Hearing based on decibel level (physiological) Oral Communication	<u>D</u> eaf (not deaf) reference <u>D</u> eafness Sign names Pre-lingually / congenitally deaf <u>D</u> eafness not based on decibel level (cultural) Manual Communication
Language	
English Oral Auditory Written Inflection / intonation / dialect Vocal volume	American Sign Language Manual Visual Not written Hand & body movement / facial expression Hand / face / body intensity
Values	
Ears and mouth Inclusive schools Family lineage Role models (based on gender, ethnicity, religion)	Eyes and hands Deaf schools Deaf heritage Role models (based on being <u>D</u> eaf)
Traditions	
Fairy tales Family reunions	ABC stories Deaf reunions
Social Protocol / Rules of Interaction	
Auditory methods acquire attention Not touch-oriented (depending on culture) Future time-oriented (depending on culture) Personal spacial boundaries Indirect methods of communication Brief departures No hearing augmentation	Visual / kinesthetic methods acquire attention Touch-oriented Present time-oriented No personal spacial boundaries Direct / assertive method of communication Long departures Assistive listening devices (ALDs)