

# **Contact borrowing of interrogative pronouns: The case of American Sign Language**

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# Sign languages in context

- Sign languages exist beside spoken languages in most countries
- Grammar is influenced by but different from the matrix spoken language; examples on request
- Sign languages take advantage of the medium of communication: simultaneity rules.



# Sign language families

- Not congruent with spoken language families, e.g.
  - American Sign Language (ASL) developed from French Sign Language, though with some early side influence of British Sign Language via Martha's Vineyard.
  - Taiwan Sign Language (TSL) is descended from Japanese Sign Language (JSL), with recent side influences from Chinese Sign Language, from which it is historically and typologically distinct.

# Contact with spoken/written language

- Deaf children in developed countries go to school, where they are exposed to written and often spoken language.
- In enlightened schools where sign language is used, it is usually not the native sign language but a signed version of the spoken language that is used.
- At most 10% of deaf children are exposed to a native sign language; most learn a signed version of the spoken language and later learn the native sign language.
- Direct contact with the written form is made in deaf families and schools through fingerspelling (or Chinese characters in Asia), as early as age 4.



# History of fingerspelling

- Goes back at least to 16th century in Iberia
- Brought to US along with LSF in early 19th century
- Some educational methods used fingerspelling only; those have disappeared.
- Very recent addition to JSL, KSL, and CSL; Asian sign languages use Chinese character signs instead of or in addition to fingerspelling (Ann; Fischer & Gong)

# Signs vs. fingerspelling

- Fingerspelling is a **small** part of true sign languages.
- Many sign languages have it but hardly use it, e.g., LSF
- Fingerspelling has exceptional phonology; there is no path movement, and some handshapes occur only in fingerspelled letters or initialized signs (e.g., E, M, R)

# Analogues to fingerspelling

- Similar to kanji vs. kana, but also different
  - Fingerspelling is used largely to expand the native vocabulary, so more similar to katakana than to hiragana
  - Fingerspelling is sometimes used more like hiragana when trying to sign “in English” or in some other spoken language.



# Fingerspelled words can become signs

- Fingerspelled words can have as many handshapes as there are letters in the word, BUT
- Signs are restricted to no more than two handshapes (not the case in Old French Sign Language, e.g., R-O-I for king.)
- Signs must have movement
- Fingerspelled loan signs (Battison) follow those restrictions
- Fingerspelled loan signs can be grammatically active, e.g., participate in agreement or pluralization.



# WH-SIGNS

- In ASL, there are signs for almost all wh-concepts, except for 'whose' and 'how much.'
- wh-signs vary somewhat by region, though less than previously; for example, in Texas the sign that means 'where' in standard ASL means 'what.'
- WH-signs are generally accompanied by a characteristic nonmanual signal which includes furrowed eyebrows (yes-no questions have raised eyebrows).

# LIMITS ON USAGE

- NB: never used as relative pronouns; purely interrogative
- That said, with different nonmanual component, can be used to mean ‘whoever’ or ‘whatever’
- (in JSL, perhaps influenced by spoken Japanese, wh-signs minus the non-manual component, can be indefinite pronouns).



# STANDARD ASL WH- WORDS

- WHO



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# STANDARD ASL WH- WORDS

- WHAT



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# STANDARD ASL WH- WORDS

- **WHY**

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# STANDARD ASL WH- WORDS

- WHEN





# STANDARD ASL WH- WORDS

- HOW



- **WHICH: (originally which of 2) non-wh form also means “or”.**

# WH NMB MAKES IT SO

- Adding wh- facial expression changes a regular sign to a wh-word.
- WHAT-FOR (WH-FOR)





# WH NMB MAKES IT SO

- HOW-MANY (WH-MANY)



# Fingerspelling sources of wh- words

- #WHO

● w h o

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# Fingerspelling sources of wh-words

- WHY

● why

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# fingerspelling trumps sign

- #WHEN

- (OTHER SIGNS  
DISAPPEARING)

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# Analogue: English trumps Japanese

- Old: koocha (紅茶)
- New: Lemon tea (レモンティ) (レモンぬき)
- Old: kudamono (果物)
- New: fruit (フルーツ)

# FINGERSPELLING + WHFE= NORMAL SIGN

- #DO

● DO

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- ERRANDS (pluralizes #DO)
- Whatcha doing?
- What am I do to?



# SEMANTIC SPLITS

## ● what

- #WHAT (incredulity/echo)
- #WHAT (challenge)
- Neither can be fronted.
- Ex. Japanese semantic split: gohan (ご飯) Asian rice in a bowl vs. rice (ライス) Western rice on a plate

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t fb

PAST NIGHT INDEX2 EAT WHAT

'What did you eat last night?'

fb

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OK: PAST NIGHT WHAT INDEX2 EAT

br

PAST NIGHT INDEX2 EAT #WHAT

‘You ate *what* last night?’

\*PAST NIGHT #WHAT INDEX2 EAT

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# FINGERSPELLING FOR FOCUS

- **BUSY VS. #BUSY**

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# FINGERSPELLING FOR FOCUS

- RICH vs. R-I-C-H
- My friend is wealthy
- My friend is incredibly rich



are n

# WH=FOCUS, ERGO...

- Sentence-final for extra oomph
- Example of #HOW:
- I want to go there but how?
- \*but how should I do it?  
(must be final)

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# Summary

- Fingerspelling is a small but important part of ASL.
- Fingerspelled loan signs have integrated more into the grammar than ordinary fingerspelling.
- ASL has borrowed Wh-words from English; two have so completely integrated that their source is no longer psychologically real.
- Since fingerspelling is used for focus, and since wh-words are semantically focused, it is perhaps natural that fingerspelling is preferentially used for wh-words.

# Thanks!

- **Brandon Scates**
- **Bonnie Gough**
- **ASL consultants at NTID**
- **Kang-Suk Byun**
- **Interpreters Aaron Brace and Dan Veltri**

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