

Sign language - Auslan

Auslan is a sign language that was developed by Australian Deaf people to communicate with each other. Sign languages use manual communication and gestures instead of sound to express the speaker's thoughts and meaning. This involves a combination of hand shapes, facial expressions and the orientation and movement of hands, arms or body. There is no one universal sign language.

Like other sign languages, Auslan is equal in complexity and expression to spoken language and can express nuance, force and subtlety as well as concrete information. It is not just English conveyed through signs or a manual code, but a distinct visual language that has existed as long as there have been Deaf Australians.

The evolution of Auslan

British, Irish and Scottish Deaf people who migrated to Australia in the 19th century brought their sign language with them. Over time, an Australian sign language evolved and developed its own unique characteristics. Like any other living language, Auslan continues to evolve over time, to meet the communication needs of Deaf people.

Just as hearing people in different countries speak different languages, so Deaf people around the world sign different languages. Deaf people in Japan use a different sign language to that used in Australia. Due to historical influences, Australian Sign Language (Auslan) is more like British Sign Language (BSL) than American Sign Language (ASL).

The different elements of sign language

Sign languages use a variety of ways to convey meaning. All these elements combine with one another to construct the signs on which the language is based. They include:

- **Hand shapes** – Auslan currently has 37 major hand shapes and 25 variations.
- **Orientation** – signs can be oriented to four different sides of the body, with the palm and hand facing different directions.
- **Location** – signs may be placed in different locations in relation to the body.
- **Movement** – this includes head, arm and hand movement. Movements can be large or small, depending on the sign.
- **Expression** – this is as important as intonation when speaking. It can include head and facial movements and facial expression. Many standard gestures, such as shaking the head for 'no' or raising the eyebrows to form a question, are used to convey emotion, emphasis and intensity.

It is important to use all elements of a sign language correctly. When there is no established sign, the alphabet is spelled out on the fingers: for example, when using jargon or a person's name.

The structure of Auslan

Auslan has its own distinct grammatical structure. This structure is seen (visual) rather than heard (auditory).

The following example shows the difference:

- 'I saw a beautiful black cat this morning' (English sentence construction)
- 'Black cat beautiful this morning I saw' or 'Cat black I saw this morning beautiful' (Auslan sentence construction).

Learning Auslan

Many TAFE institutions and organisations like the Vicdeaf offer regular Auslan classes. A dictionary of Auslan, written by Trevor Johnston, forms the basis for the Auslan Signbank interactive dictionary. These resources provide a lot of information about the language and individual signs.

Other forms of manual communication

The way a person communicates depends on the degree of sensory loss they experience, their communication ability and their preference. Auslan is a complete sign language, while Signed English is a sign language that directly represents spoken English. Other forms of manual communication have been developed to aid communication for people with specific needs. For example, Key Word Sign (previously known as MAKATON) is a basic communication system that uses a simplified version of Signed English to work with people with communication (speech) difficulties.

Where to get help

- Vicdeaf Tel. (03) 9473 3111
- Victorian Council of Deaf People Tel. (03) 9521 2466 (TTY/Voice)
- Deaf Australia – Sydney Office Tel. (02) 9871 8400 (TTY only) Brisbane Office Tel. (07) 3357 8266 (TTY) or (07) 3357 8266 (Voice)
- Vicdeaf Auslan Interpreting Service Tel. 1800 287 526 or (03) 9473 1117/(03) 9473 1118; (03) 9473 1143 (TTY only)

Things to remember

- Sign languages rely on the use of space, movement and facial expression to express all the nuances, force and subtleties of language.
- Australian Sign Language (Auslan) is recognised in the Australian Government Language Policy as a community language.
- Auslan has evolved like any spoken language and developed its own unique characteristics.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Victorian Deaf Society

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