Sign language - Auslan

Summary

- Auslan is the sign language of the Australian deaf community.
- It is a unique language to Australia.
- Auslan has its own grammar and vocabulary; it does not follow English sentence structure.

Auslan (Australian sign language) is the sign language of the Australian Deaf community. It was developed in Australia by people who are deaf so that they could communicate with others. The term Auslan is an acronym of Australian Sign Language, coined by Trevor Johnston in the early 1980s, although the language itself is much older.

As with other sign languages, Auslan’s grammar and vocabulary is quite distinct from English. Its development cannot be attributed to any individual; rather, it is a natural language that developed organically over time.

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.

The evolution of Auslan

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

Just as people who can hear speak different languages in different countries, people who are deaf around the world also use different sign languages, such as:

- American Sign Language (ASL)
- British Sign Language (BSL)
- Chinese Sign Language
- French Sign Language

and many more.

Sign language is influenced by the culture, language and traditions of each country, as are many spoken languages.

International Sign (IS) is a language that many deaf people learn in order to communicate more effectively with each other, especially at international events such as congresses or the Deaflympic Games.

Due to historical influences, Auslan is more like BSL than ASL.

Elements of sign language

Sign languages use a variety of ways to convey meaning. Elements combine with one another to construct the signs on which the language is based. They include:
- hand shapes – Auslan currently has 38 major handshapes with 28 variants which brings it to the total of 66 handshapes in all
- 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
- fingerspelling – Auslan uses a two handed fingerspelling system. When there is no established sign, the word is spelled out on the fingers (for example, when using jargon or a person’s name).

It is important to use all elements of a sign language correctly.

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 community, technical and further education (TAFE) institutions and organisations like Vicdeaf offer 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 communication for people who are deaf

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

- **Expression Australia formally Victorian Deaf Society:**
  - Tel. (03) 9473 1111, or toll free for country callers Tel. 1300 780 225
  - TTY: (03) 9473 1199, or toll free for country callers TTY: 1300 780 235
  - Tel. (03) 9473 1186 (Sign Language Co-ordinator)

- **Deaf Australia:**
  - Sydney Office Tel. (02) 9871 8400 (TTY only)
  - Brisbane Office Tel. (07) 3357 8266 (TTY) or (07) 3357 8266 (Voice)

- **Auslan Connections (Interpreting Service) Victoria.**
  - Tel. 1800 287 526 or (03) 9473 1117, (03) 9473 1143 (TTY only)
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