

# Sign languages and Deaf Communities

Sameer Semreen

*Senior Presenter / Sign Language Expert, Aljazeera Network*

[semreens@aljazeera.net](mailto:semreens@aljazeera.net)

**Abstract-** This paper aims to shed light the concept of signed languages globally, It examines their characteristics, development, and how they compare to spoken languages. Like spoken languages, signed languages are living languages with distinct rules and grammatical structures. It also sheds light on the societal culture of the users of this language, who are the deaf. They have a unique linguistic specificity that affects and is influenced by the environment and surroundings, which is why there are multiple societal and linguistic cultures. This paper will address the stages of development of sign languages in the Arab region and worldwide. It highlights attempts to record, share, and promote understanding of these languages among hearing communities. It will also present a definition of international signs and Arabic signs that are used as a means of communication in Arab and international forums and symposiums.

**Keywords:** Signed languages, Sign language, Deaf communities.

## 1. Linguistics in sign languages

Linguistics is a science concerned with studying the nature of languages scientifically in terms of their characteristics, structures, and degrees of similarity and dissimilarity among them. It is also concerned with studying the history of

languages and how they are acquired, so it is considered a science that studies signed language in all its aspects in a comprehensive way (Semrin, 2012).

### **1.1. Signed Languages**

These languages form a linguistic system used by the deaf to communicate. These languages rely on the use of gestures, movements, and hand signs (hand positions) to express ideas and concepts. The World Federation of the Deaf indicates that there are more than 200 sign languages around the world, and each language reflects the privacy and culture of its users from the many deaf communities in the world.

### **1.2. Sign Language (SL)**

It is a visual means of communication, which adopts a specific linguistic system. This system incorporates hand movements and shapes of the hands, gestures, physical movements, and facial expressions, all of which are adopted by the deaf community in any country for communication among themselves and others. It encompasses expression and learning about all aspects of life and is characterized with its own rules and structures. SL is considered the first and natural language of the deaf community.

### **1.3. National Sign Language**

National SL represents a linguistic system that uses visual signs which include all the linguistic units associated with them, and carry connotations and meanings agreed upon by deaf people from the same country who use it as the communication language among themselves (the mother tongue).

#### **1.4. Arabic sSigns**

They refer to the most common Arabic signs and are used as a secondary language in Arab conferences and forums.

#### **2. The concept of Sign Language**

Interest in sign language for the deaf intensified in the last era of the last century, after gaining worldwide recognition as the natural mother tongue of the deaf, because it is connected to their psychological dimensions, and because it was distinguished by its ability to easily express the needs of the deaf and create concepts for him. Indeed, some creative deaf people can write poems and literary pieces, and translate verbal poems into this language, which depends mainly on the motor rhythm of the body, especially the hands. The formations of hands and fingers form a wonderful way to express ourselves, as we can use them to laugh, cry, rejoice, get angry, express a desire, express an emotion, and express ourselves. It is also possible to sing and act with the hand instead of singing and acting with words. Someone came up with the slogan "Eyes to Hear."

Sign language is performed with one or both hands and in different places of the body, to deliver an expression that carries significance and meaning through units called parameters or elements, which are:

- Handshape
- Movement
- Location
- Palm orientation

- Non-manual signals (Facial expressions, eyes, mouth, eyebrows, shoulders).

### **3. Sign Language and Its Development in the World**

As for the history of sign language and its development in the world, the real beginning of scientific interest in the history of the deaf dates back to the end 1960s and early 1970s. Given the relatively recent focus on the history of the deaf,, it becomes clear that it is difficult to trace and document the history of sign language in the world. However, this has not prevented some researchers from asserting that throughout history, and wherever there are deaf people in the world, there will be a sign language, and what is worth noting is the connection of the history of sign language with the history of educating the deaf, as many educators took it as a basis for teaching them.

The beginning of historical documentation of educating the deaf and the use of sign language in educating them dates back to the sixteenth century. This began with the Spanish monk De Leon (1520-1584), who started teaching two deaf children from a wealthy family and is considered the first known teacher of the deaf in the world. Not much is known about the method that De Leon used in teaching, but it is believed that sign language was part of it, especially the signs that the two deaf children used at home. The Frenchman De L'Epee is considered the first to adopt the use of the manual alphabet with signs, and he was the first to establish a school for the deaf in the world in Paris in the late 1760s. De L'Epee also adopted the sign language used among the deaf in Paris to teach and educate the deaf for its success in conveying information to deaf students easily and conveniently.

In the United States of America, the beginning of change and development in sign language was linked to the opening of the first institute for the deaf in America in 1817 by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc. Clerc, the deaf teacher who came from the Paris Institute for the Deaf, is considered the first deaf teacher in America. Before that date, deaf people used what was known as local signs for communication. However, the institute provided the environment that contributed to the interaction between the existing American Sign Language used by deaf students and the French Sign Language used by Clerc and Gallaudet in teaching. This interaction resulted in the now-known American Sign Language (ASL) which studies indicate is derived 30% from French Sign Language.

This beginning in deaf education in the United States of America continued and developed through the establishment of more deaf institutes in many states. As a natural result of this development in public education for the deaf, the way was opened for the deaf to continue university education through the establishment of Gallaudet University in 1864, which is considered the only one of its kind in the world designated for deaf and hearing students who are proficient in sign language.

This development has culminated in several studies on the grammar of American Sign Language and proving that it is a real language no less than other languages. One of the most important of these studies is that of William Stokoe, who was appointed as an English professor at Gallaudet University in 1955.

Since its establishment in 1951 in Rome, Italy, the World Federation of the Deaf has been dedicated to promoting awareness of the linguistic culture of the deaf and the necessity of respecting and using it in all aspects of life-related to them. The International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also came to confirm this right and recognize these languages for the diverse deaf

communities in the world. Hence, many countries recognized their sign languages and considered them among the approved official languages. With technological progress and the development of artificial intelligence, deaf people and researchers around the world have benefited from this technology, and it has been used in documenting, disseminating, and teaching sign languages by designing their own applications and programs after they were limited to illustrated paper dictionaries.

#### **4. The Development of Sign Language in the Arab World**

The development of sign language in the Arab region began with timid attempts to document sign languages, the first of which was the Egyptian dictionary in 1972 by the Egyptian National Association for the Care of the Deaf under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Affairs, then the Jordanian dictionary in 1990, after which many local dictionaries were developed. Sign languages have been documented in most Arab countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Libya, Iraq, UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Sudan, Mauritania, Qatar, Sultanate of Oman, Syria, Lebanon and Tunisia.

There remains an urgent need to develop this language, and attempts have emerged to unify Arabic signs, given the Arab connection to their shared cultural, social, religious, linguistic, and geographical heritage, which prompted the Council of Arab Ministers of Social Affairs to decide to document the most common Arabic signs used by deaf Arabs and come up with an Arabic dictionary. Indeed, in 1999, the first Arabic SL dictionary was launched by the Arab community under the auspices of the League of Arab States. This significant achievement involved active participation from both the Arab Organization for

Education, Culture and Science and the Arab Union of Bodies Working for the Care of the Deaf.

In 1997, Al-Ramezi and Semreen began collecting scientific material to prepare a geographical dictionary of the names of countries and cities in worldwide. This project was completed in 2004 under the sponsorship of the Qatar Society for People with Special Needs.

In continuation of previous efforts, a workshop was held to document the most common Arabic signs that were not included in the first dictionary, from December 19 to 29, 2005 in the State of Qatar.

Deaf Arabs also benefited from the technological revolution in the world and began to develop, document, publish, and teach their national languages. Numerous applications focusing on the national and Arabic sign language appeared. Concurrently, many Arab researchers began to enter the world of this language, study it, and produce specialized literature in the science of sign linguistics.

## **5. Sign Language and Spoken Languages**

Sign language is a natural language that evolves organically over time among its users. While its grammatical structure shares general principles with all human languages, it also has unique characteristics in its system, including distinct grammatical rules and independence from spoken language.

Over the past three decades, research on sign languages has established that they share the same linguistic characteristics as spoken languages, developed naturally like them, and no one, whether the hearing or the deaf, invented any

of the natural sign languages over generations. Therefore, sign languages are not universal or comprehensive, indicating that no single sign language is used by all deaf people worldwide..

## **6. International Signs and Arabic Signs**

There is no unified sign language in the world, instead, each deaf community boasts its distinct linguistic characteristics. This diversity can pose communication challenges, particularly for deaf individuals from different countries using varied languages. As deaf people around the world met each other in international and regional events, the need for effective communication was created. This is why the so-called international signs appeared, and they are signs taken from many sign languages used around the world, including the most common, understood, and used signs by a large number of deaf people around the world. The intermingling of languages has also generated many common signs. Moreover, international signs are not considered fixed, but they change, increase, and decrease according to place, time, and the target audience. Arabic signs, mutually agreed upon by deaf Arabs, have found use in various forums and media. . It is worth noting that the Arabic sign languages are very similar to each other by virtue of their cultural heritage and geographical proximity, except for certain North African Arab countries (Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco), as well as Somalia, Djibouti, and the Comoros, which are influenced by non-Arab linguistic cultures.

## **7. Conclusion**



Studies have proven that sign languages are living languages that have a linguistic system, rules, and structures like other spoken languages, and that they differ from them in terms of linguistic structures and rules. While sharing common elements and components like manual movement, gestures, and physical expressions, SL vary in hands shapes, movements meanings, and connotations. It should also be noted that all elements are considered parts that cannot be separated from each other to form a meaningful linguistic word or words.

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