

when was asl recognized as a language

When was ASL recognized as a language is a significant question within the fields of linguistics, education, and Deaf culture. American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete, natural language that has developed over time in the Deaf community in the United States and parts of Canada. Understanding when ASL was recognized as a legitimate language involves exploring its history, the evolution of sign languages, and the social and cultural changes that contributed to its acceptance.

Historical Context of ASL

American Sign Language can trace its roots back to the early 19th century. It emerged primarily from the interaction of various sign languages used by Deaf individuals in the United States, particularly influenced by French Sign Language (LSF). The following timeline highlights key milestones in the history of ASL:

1. Early 1800s: The establishment of the first American school for the Deaf, the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817 by Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc, played a pivotal role in the development of ASL. The incorporation of LSF into the existing sign languages used by Deaf individuals in America laid the foundation for ASL.
2. 1864: Gallaudet University was established in Washington, D.C., as the first institution of higher education for Deaf and hard of hearing students, further promoting the use of ASL.
3. 20th Century Developments: While ASL was widely used within the Deaf community, it faced considerable stigma and was often viewed as a lesser form of communication compared to spoken language. This perception persisted well into the 20th century.

Recognition of ASL as a Language

The journey toward recognizing ASL as a legitimate language took several decades, marked by both advocacy and research. The following factors contributed to its official recognition:

1. Linguistic Research

In the 1960s, researchers like William Stokoe began to study ASL rigorously. Stokoe's work was groundbreaking as it provided a systematic analysis of

ASL's structure, grammar, and syntax, showing that it met all the criteria of a natural language. His studies culminated in several significant contributions:

- Stokoe's Dictionary of American Sign Language: Published in 1965, this dictionary documented ASL signs and their meanings, providing a comprehensive resource for both the Deaf community and linguists.
- Recognition of ASL's Grammar: Stokoe articulated that ASL has its own grammatical rules distinct from English, debunking the myth that it was merely a signed version of English.

2. Advocacy from the Deaf Community

The Deaf community has played an essential role in advocating for the recognition of ASL as a legitimate language. Several key events and movements highlighted the importance of ASL:

- Deaf President Now (DPN) Movement (1988): This pivotal protest at Gallaudet University demanded the appointment of a Deaf president. The movement emphasized the value of ASL and the need for Deaf leadership, which resonated with the broader recognition of ASL as a vital part of Deaf culture.
- Cultural Identity: The growing acknowledgment of Deaf culture in the late 20th century, including its language, art, and history, further solidified ASL's status as a legitimate language.

Formal Recognition of ASL

The formal recognition of ASL as a legitimate language was a gradual process influenced by educational institutions, governmental agencies, and linguistic research. Key events include:

1. Educational Institutions

As more educators began to recognize ASL's significance, numerous programs and courses focused on ASL began to emerge:

- Inclusion in Curriculum: In the late 20th century, ASL began to be incorporated into public school curricula and higher education programs, which helped legitimize its use and importance.
- ASL as a Foreign Language: Some universities started offering ASL as a foreign language option, allowing hearing students to learn it alongside traditional languages, further recognizing its complexity and richness.

2. Government and Legal Recognition

The recognition of ASL was also reflected in legal and governmental frameworks:

- **ADA and Accessibility:** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted in 1990, recognized the rights of individuals with disabilities, including Deaf individuals. This legislation emphasized the need for effective communication, which included the use of ASL.
- **Federal and State Legislation:** Over the years, various state and federal laws have acknowledged ASL as a legitimate language, leading to improved access for Deaf individuals in education, healthcare, and public services.

Impact of Recognition on ASL and the Deaf Community

The recognition of ASL as a legitimate language has had profound implications for the Deaf community and society as a whole. Some notable impacts include:

1. Increased Awareness and Acceptance

The acknowledgment of ASL has led to greater awareness among the hearing population regarding Deaf culture and the importance of ASL as a means of communication. This has fostered an environment of acceptance and understanding.

2. Educational Opportunities

The inclusion of ASL in educational settings has provided Deaf students with more opportunities to learn in an environment that respects and utilizes their primary language. This has resulted in improved educational outcomes and more successful integration into society.

3. Cultural Preservation

As ASL has gained recognition, it has become a vital part of Deaf culture. The preservation of ASL is crucial for maintaining the identity, values, and heritage of the Deaf community. Efforts to promote ASL through literature, storytelling, and art have flourished.

Conclusion

The journey of American Sign Language from a misunderstood mode of communication to a recognized language reflects broader societal changes regarding the Deaf community and sign languages. The tireless efforts of linguists, advocates, and the Deaf community itself have culminated in a recognition that not only honors ASL's linguistic complexity but also the rich cultural heritage it represents. Today, ASL stands as a testament to the importance of language in shaping identity and community, embodying the resilience and strength of Deaf individuals throughout history. Understanding when ASL was recognized as a language is crucial, as it marks a significant turning point in the journey toward equality, accessibility, and appreciation of linguistic diversity.

Frequently Asked Questions

When was American Sign Language (ASL) officially recognized as a legitimate language?

American Sign Language was officially recognized as a legitimate language in the 1960s, particularly after the work of linguist William Stokoe, who published research highlighting its unique grammar and structure.

What significant event contributed to the recognition of ASL as a language?

The establishment of the first interpreter training program in 1964 and the subsequent recognition of ASL's linguistic properties by William Stokoe's research were significant events that contributed to its recognition as a language.

Are there any specific milestones in the 1970s that helped in the recognition of ASL?

Yes, in the 1970s, the publication of the first ASL dictionary and the growing number of academic studies on ASL helped solidify its recognition as a fully developed language.

How did the recognition of ASL impact educational policies for deaf individuals?

The recognition of ASL as a legitimate language led to the inclusion of ASL in educational programs for the deaf, promoting bilingual education and improving access to communication for deaf students.

Is ASL recognized legally in the United States?

While ASL is not recognized as an official language at the federal level in the United States, it is widely accepted within the deaf community and has influenced laws and policies regarding accessibility and education for deaf individuals.

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