



WFD-WASLI Frequently Asked Questions about International Sign¹

- **What is International Sign (IS)?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

When deaf people from different language backgrounds meet, they are much more easily able to communicate with each other in comparison to hearing people from different language backgrounds when they first come into contact. In the absence of the one universal sign language, how is this possible?

Writings about early civilisations indicate that deaf people have been communicating by gesture or signs from 5th century BC. There is evidence of Greek, Roman and Jewish philosophers writing about deaf people, their place in society, their status in law and how they lived their daily lives. For as long as there have been deaf communities around the world, deaf people from these communities have come into contact with others from other communities (Woll and Adam, 2012).

It is necessary to look closely at the ways in which deaf people interact when they do not share a sign language. Zeshan (2015) discusses **cross-signing** which looks at the types of linguistic resources signers use when they are in face-to-face gatherings and “create meaning” together. The second is the use of **International Sign (IS)** at gatherings of deaf people throughout the world. International Sign, as described below, is not a language, but rather a set of conventions used at international events that some authors have said are pidgin-like. Translanguaging is a dynamic language practice, in which people use their own language and semiotic resources, visual signs, gestures, by “signing, gesturing, speaking, mouthing, writing (in the air, on paper, on hands or arms), typing (on mobile phones, on calculators, on computers), fingerspelling in different (named) languages, or pointing at text” (De Meulder et al 2019: 2). Both cross-signing and IS are examples of translanguaging which uses iconic structures along with the use of signs from more than one sign language (De Meulder et al, 2017).

- **Where does IS come from?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

This transnational contact continues to this day. The international Deaf Community is highly mobile and in the 21st century, there are regular international events, including the World Congresses of WFD, Deaflympics Games, and other international and regional events. The WFD has at 2019, 122 ordinary members (national associations of deaf people)² covering all continents of the world, and the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf (ICSD) has 113 national sports federations³ as members. Both organisations were established in Europe, the ICSD in Paris, France in 1924 and the WFD in Rome, Italy in 1951. Additionally, social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube enable deaf people to record and upload video clips of themselves signing for other deaf people from within and outside their country to watch. Finally, deaf people are mobile global citizens who travel the world and meet other deaf people from other sign language communities.

- **Is IS a language?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

The term IS, rather than *International Sign Language* or *International Signs*, indicates that IS *does not* have full linguistic status but is a translanguaging practice. In a survey of its member countries, the WFD found that its representatives did not consider IS to be a full language⁴. Also, even though it is used in cross-language communication, it is not possible to compare IS to Esperanto as IS is not a planned language with a fixed lexicon and a fixed set of grammatical rules; *Gestuno: International Sign Language of the Deaf* was an unsuccessful attempt in the 1970s by the WFD along with the British Deaf Association to create a standardised artificial international sign language.

¹ Prepared by Robert Adam, Coordinator, WFD Expert Group on Sign Language and Deaf Studies

² <http://wfdeaf.org/who-we-are/members/wfd-members/>

³ <https://www.deaflympics.com/countries>

⁴ http://wfdeaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Perspectives-on-the-Concept-and-Definition-of-IS_Mesch-FINAL.pdf

This cross-linguistic communication has also been described as a pidgin (Quinto-Pozos and Adam, 2013, Quinto-Pozos and Adam, 2015). It is not as possible to discuss complex concepts using sign pidgins as it is with sign languages, particularly for people who have not had prior experience of any cross-language contact. When two deaf people of differing language backgrounds meet, a situational pidgin arises, and both people use their own linguistic and gestural resources as well as their knowledge of cross-language contact to communicate. The more contact signers have contact with signers from different language backgrounds, the more familiar they become with different ways of communicating, iconic signs and visual resources. This process also includes semantic broadening and narrowing of individual signs based on this contact.

Even though IS is considered a pidgin without any native signers or evidence of extended continuous usage, it has been found to have a more complex structure than are found in pidgins. In a study on the grammar of IS, Supalla and Webb (1995) report finding subject-verb-object (SVO) word order, five types of negation, and verb agreement. This is most likely due to the similar visual and spatial structures of the sign languages in contact. Studies of IS have largely involved contact among European sign languages (including American Sign Language (ASL), which is of European origin) and this may provide a misleading picture, especially as many European sign languages are a part of the langue des signes française (LSF) family of sign languages. An important question that has not been discussed is that it is not clear how effective IS is for deaf people from Asia and Africa. Nevertheless, it is used at international gatherings of deaf people where it has also been found to be longer in duration and slower in production. This has implications for those seeking to provide interpretation in IS at international meetings.

- **Is International Sign (IS) the same all around the world?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

International Sign (IS) is a translanguaging practice used between signers from different countries and it is not a specific sign language such as ASL or British Sign Language (BSL). Since signs can change depending on who is talking to who, there is variation when used for private communication. Thus, deaf people from different places in the world use different signs for when communicating with deaf people from other places.

Sign languages have had extensive contact with emblems which have then become incorporated as signs. Emblems are a form of co-speech gesture and thus they vary from culture to culture.

However, because the development of IS has centered around Europe, European IS is often used in international conferences. In addition, American Sign Language has had a strong influence on the development of IS. Therefore, there is a need for continued discussions about the future direction of IS.

By participating in IS events around the world, people have many opportunities for international exchange and communication and can gradually begin to acquire IS. However, deaf people who are not usually in such environments may need to seek out a place where intentional learning is undertaken. For people who do not have opportunities to attend such events, they can search for “International Sign” on YouTube and find many video clips. Social networking sites such as Facebook are also platforms for immersion in IS through involvement in international communication media. These online opportunities are increasing every year.

- **How can a person learn IS?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

The best advice for learning IS is (1) to actually be fluent in at least one sign language, and (2) to actually see and meet people using it. This is possible by watching people signing on social media or going to international events and meet with other deaf people with whom a common sign language is not shared. It will be challenging for people who do not know at least one sign language to become fluent in IS.

- **Where is IS seen?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

There are several ways of seeing IS. It can be seen at international events where deaf people congregate, such as international, regional or transnational gatherings (i.e. WFD conferences and congresses, ICSD events and others). It can also be seen on social media such as Facebook or Twitter, on individual pages, which have examples of deaf people signing.

- **What is involved in IS training?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

It is recommended that IS training covers both some of the theoretical background and some practical exercises using actual video footage of deaf people using IS. It may even be possible to invite deaf people from other countries to join online training sessions.

- **Who teaches IS?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

IS should be taught by a person who has a great deal of experience meeting deaf people from different sign language backgrounds. It is not recommended that a hearing sign language interpreter or a hearing sign language teacher provides this course but that this course be provided by a deaf person with a strong background in interpreting at, or through participation in international events.

- **What qualifications and experience should the teachers have to teach IS**

[Click here for International Sign](#)

There are no qualifications for teaching IS. Some academic courses offer an introduction to IS, a few interpreter training programmes also include interpreting in IS and there are also some community-level courses as well. None of these courses accredits or qualifies a person to teach or interpret IS.

- **Statement about how WFD and WASLI encourage the learning and teaching of local sign languages** [Click here for International Sign](#)

The WFD strongly endorses the learning and teaching of local sign languages and does not support the unification⁵ of sign languages. The WFD also believes that deaf children around the world have the right to learn sign languages. These positions are reflected in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities⁶, ([Article 24 \(3\)](#)) and also strongly supported by WASLI – the use of IS should never replace a sign language.

- **What about an international lingua franca?** [Click here for International Sign](#)

In terms of spoken languages, English is considered a lingua franca. It is used in settings where the native languages of the two speakers are not the same. With respect to sign languages, it may be possible for deaf people to use a form of IS. However, because of international development efforts or movement of deaf people to and from some countries (such as the USA), languages such as ASL or BSL to a lesser extent may be seen as a lingua franca in terms of signed languages.

About the World Federation of the Deaf

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing and promoting approximately 70 million deaf people's human rights worldwide. The WFD is a federation of deaf organisations from 122 nations; its mission is to promote the human rights of deaf people and full, quality and equal access to all spheres of life, including self-determination, sign language, education, employment and community life. WFD has a consultative status in the United Nations and is a founding member of International Disability Alliance (IDA). (www.wfdeaf.org) Email: info@wfd.fi

About the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters

The World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) is an international non-governmental organisation representing sign language interpreters. Established in 2005, WASLI promotes the development of interpreting worldwide through formations of national interpreter associations, and lobby for effective training and standards of practice. WASLI's membership includes 43 national interpreter associations. The WASLI operates with a volunteer board of directors, which includes the executive members and seven regional representatives. By promoting the professionalisation of sign language interpreting, deaf people's human rights can be supported through the provision of qualified and ethical interpreting services. (<https://wasli.org/>) Email: secretary.wasli@gmail.com

References

- Allsop, Lorna, Woll, Bencie, & Brauti, Jon-Martin. (1995, September 1–3, 1994). International sign: The creation of an international deaf community and sign language. Paper presented at the Sign Language Research 1994: Proceedings of the Fourth European Congress on Sign Language Research, September 1–3, 1994, Munich.
- De Meulder, M., Kusters, A., Moriarty, E., and Murray, J. J. (2019) Describe, don't prescribe. The practice and politics of translanguaging in the context of deaf signers, *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, DOI: [10.1080/01434632.2019.1592181](https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1592181)
- Hiddinga, A. and Crasborn, O. (2011). Signed languages and globalization. *Language in Society*, 40(04), pp. 483-505.
- Quinto-Pozos, David, & Adam, Robert. (2013). Sign Language Contact. In Robert Bayley, Richard Cameron, & Ceil Lucas (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Sociolinguistics* (pp. 379-400). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Quinto-Pozos, David, & Adam, Robert. (2015). Bilingualism and Language Contact. In Ceil Lucas & Adam Schembri (Eds.), *The Sociolinguistics of Sign Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Turner, G. H., & Napier, J. (2014). On the importance of professional sign language interpreting to political participation. In A. Pabsch (Ed.), *UNCRPD series: Political participation* (pp. 57-71). Brussels: EUD.
- Rosenstock, R. & Napier, J. (2016). *International Sign: Linguistics, Usage, and Status*. Washington: Gallaudet University Press.
- Supalla, Ted, & Webb, Rebecca. (1995). The grammar of International Sign: A new look at pidgin languages. In Karen Emmorey & Judy S Reilly (Eds.), *Language, gesture and space* (pp. 333-352). Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Woll, B, and Adam, R. (2012). Sign Language and the Politics of deafness. *The Routledge Handbook of Multilingualism*, 100-115.
- Zeshan, Ulrike. 2015. "“Making Meaning”": Communication between Sign Language Users without a Shared Language." *Cognitive Linguistics* 26 (2). doi:10.1515/cog-2015-0011.

The WFD and WASLI would like to thank Ashley Kendall for his assistance with the videotaping and editing of this document.

⁵<https://wfdeaf.org/news/resources/statement-on-the-unification-of-sign-languages-january-2007/>

⁶<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html>