ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HEBREW LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

Volume 3
P–Z

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LEIDEN • BOSTON
2013

 ISBN 978-90-04-17642-3

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Sign Language in Hebrew

Sign languages are natural languages, emerging spontaneously when a group of deaf people meets and interacts on a regular basis over a period of time. They differ from spoken languages in terms of the physical modality in which they are transmitted. However, like spoken languages, they arise within a community, and are not contrived systems of communication. Since they develop within communities, sign languages differ from one another; there is no one uniform universal sign language. Sign languages are also not visual representations of the surrounding spoken languages; they are independent languages, with their own grammatical and lexical structures.

The major sign language in Israel is Israeli Sign Language (ISL). As its name indicates, it is not a manual-visual representation of Hebrew, but rather an independent language, which is used by the Jewish Deaf community in Israel, and also by some Arab, Bedouin, and Druze communities in the country. It is a relatively young language, which came into existence about seventy-five years ago, with the initial crystallization of an emergent deaf community in Israel. The present-day community of ISL users consists of four generations: from the very first generation, that contributed to the earliest stages of the formation and development of the language, to the fourth generation, that has acquired the language as a full-fledged system. This unique socio-linguistic situation makes it possible to study the development of a language almost from its inception throughout a period of about seven decades, a rare and precious opportunity for linguists.

1. The History of ISL

In the first two decades of its existence (1930s–1950s), ISL developed simultaneously within two different venues (Meir and Sandler 2008): the emerging deaf community and the then-newly-established schools for the deaf. The members of the first generation of the deaf community came from different backgrounds, in terms of both their countries of origin and their languages. A few were born in Israel, but the majority were immigrants who came to Israel from Europe (Germany, Austria, France, Hungary, Poland), and later on from North Africa and the Middle East. Some of these immigrants brought with them the sign languages of their respective countries. Others had no signing, or had some kind of a homesign (gestural communication system developed and used among the members of a single family). The conditions under which the new sign language emerged, namely, language discontinuity and contact with other sign languages and signing systems, are characteristic of pidgin formation.

The other venue for the development of the language was the schools for the deaf. The first school was founded in Jerusalem in 1932, followed by the founding of schools in Tel-Aviv and Haifa in the 1940s (Plaut 2007). The children who attended these schools in those early days had no sign language, and the educational approach in the schools was strictly oral; that is, children were required to lip-read and speak, and signing was forbidden in the classrooms. However, the schools served as a fixed locale for

 ISBN 978-90-04-17642-3

deaf children to meet and interact regularly over extended periods. When left to themselves, the children developed a gestural communication system that evolved over the years, as it was used by the different cohorts attending these schools.

Over the years, these two paths have come together. Graduates of the deaf schools became part of the deaf community, and members of the deaf community have become more involved in the schools, both as professionals and as parents of deaf schoolchildren. Hence the communication systems that evolved in the community and in the educational systems merged, forming a new language, Israeli Sign Language. Today the community numbers about ten-thousand members. The language is quite unified across the country, though there is some regional lexical variation, e.g., some signs are typical of the Tel-Aviv area, while others may be used only in Haifa, Beer Sheva, or Jerusalem. The country of origin of the signers also may have some effect on the lexicon. Some signs are used within families of Moroccan, Algerian, Egyptian, or German origin. This latter type of variation is more pervasive among older signers.

The educational system, which at first opposed the use of signing, changed its approach in the 1970s, as it became evident that deaf children were not advancing academically as desired. Contact with deaf communities and educational systems for the deaf in other countries also had an effect, which resulted in the introduction of signing into the schools. However, the teachers did not use ISL per se, but rather a contrived communication system that involves both speech and signing simultaneously, called Signed Hebrew (see below). This situation persists today: ISL is quite rarely used by educators, whose signing is by and large restricted to Signed Hebrew.

The 1970s also witnessed the first studies of ISL as a language. A research team led by Itzchak Schlesinger, a psycho-linguist from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, started to document and study the young language. The most outstanding practical outcome of Schlesinger's research was the publication of two ISL dictionaries (Cohen, Namir, and Schlesinger 1977; Namir et al. 1977), as well as a basic description of the grammatical structure of ISL (Namir and Schlesinger 1978). Two additional dictionaries of the language were later published (Savir et al. 1992a; Zandberg and Kakoon 2006).

2. Grammatical Structures of ISL

The seminal work of William Stokoe (1960) on the phonological structure of American Sign Language (ASL) and the many that followed revealed that sign languages are full-fledged complex languages, on a par with spoken languages, and are characterized by the same hierarchical structures and levels as spoken languages: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Sandler and Lillo-Martin 2006). ISL is no exception; research over the last forty years has revealed complex, rule-governed grammatical structures on all levels.

Phonology. It may come as a surprise that sign languages have phonological structure, since they lack phones (sounds). Yet they do have a level of linguistic organization that is comparable to the phonological level of spoken languages, since, like spoken words, signs are not holistic units, but are rather built from more basic units (Stokoe 1960). Signs in ISL, as in other sign languages, are comprised of three major formational categories: Hand Configuration (comprised of handshape and orientation [Sandler 1989], Location, and Movement. Each of these categories is made up of a list of contrastive features, just as the consonant and vowel categories of spoken languages each have contrastive phonological features. In ISL, the signs MOTHER and NOON (Figure 1a) are distinguished by features of the two handshapes  and  . This is a minimal pair, because all features of the other categories—locations and movements—are the same in the two signs, which are distinguished by handshape alone. The ISL signs HEALTH and CURIOSITY (Figure 1b) are minimally distinguished by features of location (chest vs. nose, respectively), while ESCAPE and BETRAY are distinguished by movement alone, straight for ESCAPE, and arc for BETRAY (Figure 1c).

The important observation here is that, in the signs of the ISL lexicon, the different handshapes, locations, and movements function as basic building blocks, in the same way that phonemes do in spoken language. However, it has been pointed out that in sign languages, these basic units often carry meaning, and are therefore not completely parallel to phonemes in spoken languages (Johnston and Schembri 1999).

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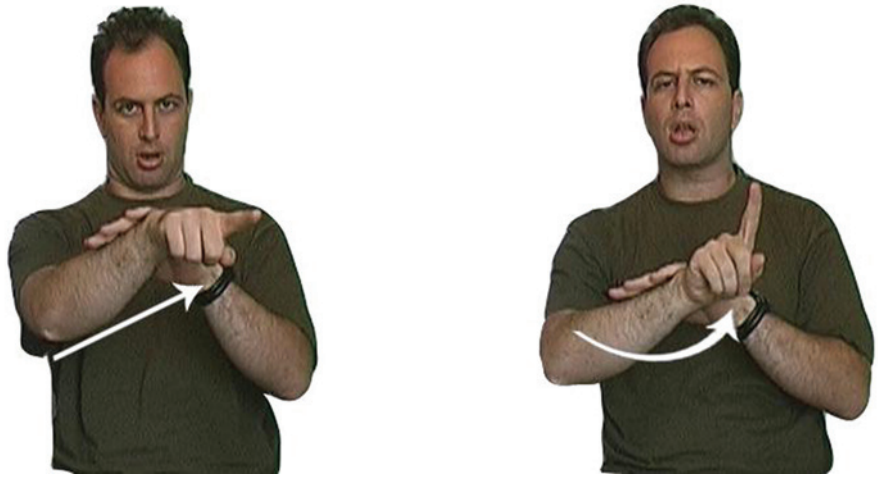
(a) MOTHER, NOON, distinguished by handshape features.

(b) HEALTH, CURIOSITY, distinguished by location features.



(c) ESCAPE, BETRAY, distinguished by movement features.

Figure 1. Minimal pairs in ISL, distinguished by (a) handshape, (b) location, and (c) movement.

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(a) (b) (c)

Figure 2. Three forms of the sign LEARN (ISL): (a) base form, (b) iterative, (c) continuative.

Fuks and Tobin (2009) conducted a semiotic analysis of the building blocks of 560 signs of the ISL lexicon, and argue that the basic formational elements of ISL always carry meaning. For example, they suggest that the torso (which is the location of the sign HEALTH above) is regarded as representing the locus of emotional and individual experience.

These basic units interact with each other in interesting ways, and may influence each other. An assimilation process in ISL provides an example. Pronominal signs, which are produced with a  handshape, may undergo handshape assimilation with a neighboring sign if they are cliticized to it (Sandler 1999).

Morphology. Sign languages are characterized by two kinds of morphological structures: sequential and simultaneous (Aronoff et al. 2005). Sequential morphology in the signed modality is quite similar to its spoken language counterpart: elements in a sequence (words and affixes) form a complex word by virtue of being linearly concatenated to one another. In simultaneous operations, meaningful units are added not by adding segments, but rather by changing them. In sign languages, it is often features of the movement component that are changed to create different morphological forms, as is evidenced by, e.g., verbal aspects and verb agreement.

Aspectual inflection, that is, verbal inflection indicating the internal temporal structure of an event such as continuity and iterativity, is exemplified by the ISL verb LEARN (Figure 2). Its base form has a double movement of the hand towards the temple. Several repetitions of the sign with its double movement yield an iterative meaning 'to study again and again'. If the sign is articulated with slower and larger single movement, repeated three times, then the verb is inflected for a continuative aspect, meaning 'to study for a long time' (Meir and Sandler 2008:92–93). This sort of morphology has been analyzed as comparable to the templatic morphology of Hebrew and other Semitic languages (Sandler 1990).

Verb agreement is indicated by a change in the direction of movement of a specific class of verbs, called 'agreeing verbs' (Padden 1988). In ISL, as in other sign languages, nominals in a clause are associated with discrete locations in space, called 'R(eferential)-loci', described below (Lillo-Martin and Klima 1990). Verbs inflected for agreement move between the R-loci associated with the subject and human object of the verb (Meir 1998; 2002). The ISL verb SHOW, for example, moves from the signer's chest towards the addressee to indicate 'I show you [something]' (Figure 3a), but has the reverse direction to indicate 'You show me [something]' (Figure 3b).

Simultaneous morphological operations are used in other constructions as well, such as intensive inflection (Sandler 1996) classifier constructions and numeral incorporation (Meir and Sandler 2008).

ISL also makes use of concatenative operations, such as compounding and affixation. Compounding is a very productive word-formation process in the language (Meir and Sandler 2008:48). Some examples of compounds in ISL

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(a) (b)

Figure 3. Two forms of the verb SHOW, inflected for agreement: (a) 'I show you [something]', (b) 'You show me [something]'.

are: FEVER^ TEA—SICK, HEART^OFFER—VOLUNTEER, HEAD/MIND^FALL—FAINT, KNOW^EVERYONE—FAMOUS. A few affixes have been found in ISL, among them a negative suffix attaching to nouns and adjectives meaning 'without' (e.g., IMPORTANT+NEG:SUFFIX 'without importance, unimportant'; Meir 2003); and a family of affixes descended from signs indicating sensory perception that can be used to create forms that bear meanings such as 'to do something by seeing/hearing/smelling (intuiting)', etc. For example, EYE+SHARP means 'to discern by seeing' (Aronoff et al. 2005).

Syntax. ISL is characterized by a variety of word orders: SOV is the most common, but SVO and SVOV are also quite common (Meir 2010). In addition, Topic-Comment structures are also prevalent in the language. Rosenstein (2001) argues that Topic-Comment structures are actually basic structures in the language, and that ISL is better described as a Topic-prominent, rather than Subject-prominent language (in the sense of Li and Thompson 1976). Some examples of Topic-Comment structures in ISL are (Meir and Sandler 2008:125):

(1) MEDITERRANEAN-SEA, COUNTRIES, SPECIAL CHARACTER
'The countries of the Mediterranean have a special character'.
(2) MOVIE INDEXa GO—I UP-TO-NOW ZERO.
'As for going to the movies, up to now I haven't gone at all'.

As for other ordering principles, negation words tend to follow the negated constituent: EAT ZERO 'didn't eat', COMFORTABLE NOT 'not comfortable'. Question words tend to occur in clause-final position: HE GO WHERE? 'Where did he go?'; CAR NEW $INDEX_a$ FROM-WHERE? 'Where did you get this new car?' (Meir 2003). Possessive pronouns tend to follow the possessed noun: FATHER MY 'my father'.

Though signs in a signed sentence are linearly organized as are words in spoken sentences, sign languages have another structural means at their disposal when constructing a sentence: space. The hands, which produce the signs, move in the space surrounding the signer. Sign languages employ space for a variety of functions. One important function in ISL and many other sign languages is to localize referents (Meir and Sandler 2008:59–66). A referent first introduced into the discourse is often associated with a discrete location in space. This association is achieved by signing the sign for that referent, and then pointing or gazing towards a specific location in space. That location or R-locus then functions as a referential index for the nominal. Subsequent pointing or directing a verb (as in verb agreement forms) to the location has the function of an anaphoric expression. Sentences in ISL often contain such pointing signs (glossed as INDEX) that 'localize' referents in the signing space, as in example (2) above and example (3) below:

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(3) I CAKE INDEXa, ALREADY I EAT.
'I ate the cake'.

A diachronic study of ISL (Meir 2010) showed that grammatical use of space takes time to develop. Signers of the first ISL generation rarely used space for referents' localization and verb agreement. It took three generations for a structured ruled-governed system to emerge.

Non-Manual marking. While the hands are central in conveying the linguistic information in any sign language, they are not the only actors in the signing scene. Facial expression and head and body posture carry important information, and constitute part of the prosodic system in sign languages (Nespor and Sandler 1999). Changes in body and head postures signal constituent boundaries. Facial expressions encode specific grammatical information, and accompany specific sentence types. For example, different brow positions signal sentence types in ISL (as well as in many other sign languages). Raised brows signal continuation intonation, and characterize Yes/No questions, topics, and the protasis of conditionals. Furrowed brows signal puzzlement and are characteristic of WH-questions. A squint serves as a signal to the addressee that the information marked by it is not immediately accessible and is to be retrieved from his/her background knowledge (Dachkovsky 2008). Squinting often occurs with constituents signaled as background knowledge shared by the interlocutors, relative clauses, and also temporal clauses referring to the remote past. The system is componential (Sandler 1999 SL&L; Dachkovsky 2008): for example, the sentence "Have you seen that movie (that we were talking about)?," is simultaneously marked both by raised brows that marks yes/no questions and by a squint signaling background information shared by interlocutors (Nespor and Sandler 1999).

3. ISL and Hebrew

As should be clear by now, ISL is an independent language, with its own grammatical structure and lexicon. It is not a visual representation of Hebrew. However, the two languages are in constant contact; all ISL users also know Hebrew to a lesser or greater extent, since they use Hebrew for reading and writing, for studying, and for communicating with hearing people. Since Hebrew is the dominant language in the wider community, it is expected that some influence of Hebrew on ISL will be found. The most noticeable effect is in the lexicon: ISL may borrow lexical items from Hebrew, using several devices (Meir and Sandler 2008:50–52). One borrowing mechanism is fingerspelling, in which each letter of the alphabet is represented by a different handshape. Fingerspelling, then, actually represents the written word. Fingerspelling is often used to refer to people's names, and to express technical terms for which no sign exists.

A mechanism of partial borrowing is initialization, in which the fingerspelled handshape representing the first letter of the ambient spoken language word becomes the handshape for the sign. For example, the signs for דרך *derex* 'road' and כביש *kviš* 'paved road' have the same movement and location, but differ in handshape: the former has a ד handshape, and the latter a כ handshape.

Finally, there are some loan translations from Hebrew, especially in compounds, such as PARTY^SURPRISE מסיבת-הפתעה *mesibat hafta'a* 'surprise party', SHOE^HOUSE נעלי-בית *na'ale-bayit* 'slippers'.

4. Signed Hebrew

ISL is indeed independent of Hebrew. Yet there is a communication system which can be regarded as 'manual-visual Hebrew'. The system—Signed Hebrew—is a form of communication that makes use of two channels of communication simultaneously: spoken and signed. Its speakers speak Hebrew and accompany their speech with signs from the vocabulary of ISL. The result is a hybrid communication system, which has Hebrew word order and signs from the ISL lexicon, but lacks the rich grammatical structure of ISL, and represents only very partially the grammatical structure of Hebrew. This kind of communication system is often used when deaf and hearing people interact, and is the form of signing used in the educational system. For a more comprehensive discussion of Signed Hebrew, its advantages and shortcomings as a communication system, see Meir and Sandler (2008:203–207).

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5. Other Sign Languages in Israel

ISL is the sign language used by the largest community in Israel. But it is not the only one. There are other sign languages in the country; some arose in Israel, others were brought to Israel by immigrants. A number of sign languages arose in small, relatively closed communities in some Arab, Bedouin, and Druze villages. In these communities, congenital deafness became relatively widespread because of genetics and marriage patterns. The need for communication between deaf and hearing family members gave rise to autochthonous sign languages is the communities. Sign Languages emerging in such social conditions are called 'Village Sign Languages' (Meir et al. 2010). Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), a language that emerged in the Al-Sayyid community in the Negev about seventy-five years ago, is the best studied village sign language in Israel (e.g., Kisch 2004; Sandler et al. 2005; Aronoff et al. 2008), but other languages emerged in Kfar Kasem, Ein Mahel, and probably other villages.

At least two sign languages were brought to Israel by immigrants. Immigrants from the former Soviet Union brought Russian Sign Language with them. And immigrants from the Algerian city of Ghardaia, who moved to Israel in the 1960s, brought with them a sign language that had developed in their community, and they continue to use it even today, some fifty years later (Meir et al. 2010). But the younger generation does not use the language anymore, and therefore the language is highly endangered.

This wealth of sign languages in such a small geographical area makes Israel a goldmine for comparative, diachronic, and socio-linguistic studies of sign languages and their communities.

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Silence

Every speaker notices that just as there is 'empty speech', i.e., speech that is not meant to communicate, so there is verbally eloquent silence (hence verbal silence), i.e., silence that is not mere stillness or pause in discourse, but a means chosen by the speaker (holding the floor) to communicate.

The ad of לתת *latet* (an Israeli humanitarian aid organization) published in Israeli daily newspapers on the eve of the Jewish New Year (*Rosh Ha-Shana*) certainly does not contain a 'cut and (no)paste' typo. This ad, which reads תַּפּוּחַ בִּ *tapuaχ bi* 'Apple with ____', deliberately and cleverly omits the expected attribute דְּבַשׁ *dvaš* 'honey'. This ellipsis—featured in the ad's syncopated incomplete wording iconically expresses the wanting, incomplete festive treat. The word תַּפּוּחַ *tapuaχ* 'apple', a common comestible, does appear in the ad (it might be served at the table of the needy). The iconic mapping between the ad's wording and its message, by the silencing of דבש *dvaš* 'honey' conveys to the daily's reader that just as s/he is able to buy a newspaper, and linguistically to fill in the missing word in the ad, s/he is able to 'fill in' (in the real world) the missing honey on the poor person's festive table. This is a speech act (collecting donations) linguistically (pragmatically) expressed by using silence. The silencing (of 'honey' and the speech act) does all the work. An explicit statement—in words—would not achieve this goal.

This example serves to show that we are not dealing with implication (by the addressee) here: not realizing the word 'honey' is a means chosen and implemented by the speaker, who also provides her/his addressee with an enclitic proposition (Hebrew בִּ *bi-* 'with') as forerunner of that silence.

 ISBN 978-90-04-17642-3