How Pinocchio Becomes a Real Boy: The Journey from Invented to Regularized Language—The Case of Fingerspelling

James W. Van Manen
“The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands but in seeing with new eyes.”

— Marcel Proust
I am a Conlang Wrangler

• I wrote an 175 page unpublished manuscript about 10 years ago that contains an invented sign language called Worldfirst

• I did conlang and con-culture, and con-world work to write the story

• You have revived my interest in reworking my manuscript and fleshing out “my” first con-lang: Worldfirst
From Con to Nat

• How do we use created language?
• The Case of American Sign Language
  Fingerspelling
Friar Melcor de Yebra. *Refugim Infirmorum* 1593

Mano ser conocido, y en nada se atendio, porque te sera mas provechoso para entrar en el cielo, que se alabado, y reputado de los hombres.
History

• In 1620, 27 years later, Juan Pablo Bonet detailed the use of a manual alphabet for education and didn’t give Yebra credit for creating the system.
Spain to France

- Charles-Michel de l'Épée found Bonet’s book and learned some signs from two Deaf twins in Pairs and founded the French School for the Deaf in 1760
France to the USA

• Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc (Deaf) founded the American School for the Deaf in 1817 using Clerc’s knowledge of French Sign Language (including the one-handed alphabet)
Fingerspelling Engraving
1886

Gordon, American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb, 1886
A Simple Question?

- If it has been through 4 countries and has been used as a component of languages for over 400 years, what can we guess about it?
A Simple Question?

- If it has been through 4 countries and has been used as a component of languages for over 400 years, what can we guess about it?

IT WILL CHANGE!!!
Mano ser conocido, y en nada fiado, porque te sería más provechoso para entrar en el cielo, que se alabado, y reputado de los hombres.
When it comes to what Deaf people actually do when they fingerspell---it is like this...
Here it is in a Metaphor:

Native ASL users don’t use the same set of tools that they teach hearing people to use.
Users of ASL are not doing this on purpose, but it is hard on new learners.
This is what they use...
This is What You Get
Words for Letters

• Languages have words for letters

• Non-linguists have been brainwashed (inculcated) to believe the words they use ARE letters

• This is not true

• W is a great example--two words except in Texas...
Sign = Word

- Fingerspelling is like Speechspelling

- Speechspelling: the act of saying the words for each alphabetic letter (spelling out loud)

- Each symbol in the alphabet has a corresponding sign in ASL-- or that is what we once thought
My Ah-ha!

• Why was this system so hard for non-natives? I learned it as a baby

• To find out I decided to do something revolutionary as it pertains to fingerspelling

• I assumed nothing and watched what native fingerspellers did when they fingerspell
EVER

Dr. David Geeslin
Superintendent, Indiana School for the Deaf

Sunday, May 5, 13
FAN

Dr. David Geeslin
Superintendent, Indiana School for the Deaf

Sunday, May 5, 13
The Problem

• Allophones of Phonemes

• We assume there are 26 things to learn because there is a relationship between the modern Roman alphabet and their fingerspelled “counterparts”
No One Knows Yet...

- We don’t know how many allophones exist for each phoneme
- If we don’t know what these are and don’t know how many there are, we can’t easily teach non-native users to see them...
ASL Phonemes

E

PHONEME

Mental Construct
Phonemes and Allophones

(E)

PHONEME

ALLOPHONES

Mental Construct

Physical Constructs

Sunday, May 5, 13
Phonemes and Allophones

(E)

PHONEME

ALLOPHONES
Phonemes and Allophones

(E)

PHONEME

ALLOPHONES

Bob Johnson 1995
Phonemes and Allophones

(E) PHONEME

ALLOPHONES
Allophones of E

previously known

newly discovered!
New Allophones of E

Medial E after M  |  Medial E after N  |  Medial E after V  |  Medial E after T
--- | --- | --- | ---
![Hand posture 1](image1) | ![Hand posture 2](image2) | ![Hand posture 3](image3) | ![Hand posture 4](image4)

Final E after M  |  Final E after N  |  Final E after T  |  Final E after V
--- | --- | --- | ---
![Hand posture 5](image5) | ![Hand posture 6](image6) | ![Hand posture 7](image7) | ![Hand posture 8](image8)
I can document these allophones of phonemes from films over 100 years old.
I can document these allophones of phonemes from films over 100 years old.
Then Things Get Odd

- New additions to the ASL alphabet ZZ, CH,
- Synomorphs
ZZ vs Z
A NEW SIGN IN ASL! ZZ

Existed previously only in lexicalized fingerspelled signs like PIZZA and JAZZ

This lexicalized form seems to have become productive in the language and can appear whenever ‘zz’ is needed
• Seems ASL has decided it needs its own sign for CH

• ASL is visual so it can’t be because CH it is one sound

• It may have something to do with the single mouth movement for two written things--a time saver to make one sign for it

• It may be simple assimilation
look at the CH
Dr. David Geeslin
Superintendent, Indiana School for the Deaf

Sunday, May 5, 13
Synomorphs

• A sign simultaneously demonstrating the salient features of more than one fingerspelled sign

• Different from coarticulation because that a blend of sounds--this is two things actually both occurring at the same time

• IB IC, ID, IE, IL, MI, NI, SI, A

• about 40 so far (most related to I)
• Citation Form (Phoneme) X

• Commonly Used Forms (Common Allophone) SIDE X and FRONT X
tim-D

• tim-D = The allophone where only the thumb, index, and middle finger are used

• I believe it is more probable to see tim-D following signs where any or all of the I, M, R, or P fingers are already down

• tim-D occurs after L and after A
MI (synomorph)

Citation I  MI  Mid MI  High MI
C after N
Phonemes and Allophones

(E)

PHONEME
Recap

- ASL phonemes and allophones in Fingerspelling

- You saw that ASL uses more than 26 allophones to describe the written alphabet

- Synomorphs and synophones are not the same as coarticulation
Recap

- You were exposed to newly discovered signs in ASL! ZZ and CH
- You saw the newly discovered allophones for X: Side-X and Front-X
- You saw the fully described TIM-D
Implications for Conlangs

• Follow the phonetic system of a natlang or be able to be pronounced in a natlang
• Get exposure and become useful to the natlang--fill a gap in the language
• Words with unique meaning may make it
• Expect changes to happen over time
Jim Van Manen, Ph.D.
jvanmanen@colum.edu
Columbia College Chicago