

Sign Language Surprises:

Things we thought were true about all sign languages but it turns out they aren't, or at least not necessarily

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Until quite recently, most research on sign languages has been on those sign languages based originally in Europe, such as American Sign Language (ASL), British Sign Language (BSL), Auslan, the sign languages of Scandinavia, and a number of others. This rather narrow range of languages has colored our ideas of what sign languages are like and what they can and cannot do. My work over the last 15 years has concentrated on the sign languages of East Asia, especially the sign language of Japan. In this presentation, I shall discuss commonalities among diverse established sign languages, such as verb agreement and the use of classifiers. Then I shall concentrate on differences between Asian and Western sign languages in word formation, syntax, and in particular the use of prosody to convey syntactic distinctions. If time permits, I shall then return to the proposed commonalities and speculate on why they don't extend to so-called "village" sign languages